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**Sex education, gender and sexualised behaviour in the primary
school: a qualitative analysis of parent, teacher and pupil
perspectives**

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Abstract

This thesis compares teachers' and parents' views concerning content and delivery of KS1 Sex and Relationships Education with children's lived experiences and understanding of gender and sexuality. Data was gathered through 18 focus group interviews drawn from a Midlands primary school. These revealed the hegemonic nature of heterosexuality within the primary school and family. Parents' expectations of their own children were underpinned by assumptions of heterosexuality and innocence. Likewise, teachers assumed heterosexuality but drew more upon a professional discourse of appropriate pedagogy and maturity. Most adult participants highlighted the need to educate children for the world they encounter and were keen to promote tolerance and understanding of the assumed Other. What became evident among the adults was a lack of confidence in their own abilities as educators and a lack of certainty about what might be appropriate.

Children's expressions of gender and sexuality were firmly rooted within a largely stereotypical binary framework, as were their articulated "romantic" aspirations. Children's attachment to traditional views about female and male were evident in some of the ways they policed gender and sexual identities and in discussions that covered play, future employment and children's girlfriend/boyfriend relationships (involvement in which enhanced children's status among their peers but were ignored or dismissed by parents).

Despite moves to make Relationships Education statutory, this remains a sensitive subject, treated uniquely within the curriculum. I propose that it should be rooted in children's prior knowledge and understanding of the world and themselves rather than on that assumed or hoped for by adults. Adults, I argue, must talk to and observe children, acknowledging that their lives carry authentic meaning. They need to educate real rather than imagined children. Teachers should critically examine how school structures affect children's active construction of their gender and sexual identities and how they view others.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Personal motivations for this qualitative study

In 2007 I was working as a supply teacher at a school on the outskirts of a large northern city. I had only been teaching the class for a few weeks when a parent came to complain about the behaviour of some of the boys. Extremely upset, she explained that the previous day a small group of boys had chased her daughter across the playing field trying to kiss her and shouting that they were going to 'shag' her. The children involved were in a Year 1 class and all were five or six years old.

In my experience as a primary school teacher, this was just one among a number of similar incidents involving Key Stage (KS) 1 children. On one occasion, a dinner supervisor had caught a girl undressing for one of the boys behind an undercover area in the playground. When questioned, the girl explained that they were essentially role playing what she had seen her mother (a sex worker) do with her 'friends'. In one class, a small group of the boys would surreptitiously grope the girls when they sat on the carpet during lessons. The headteacher and deputy headteacher (both men) spoke to the children. They explained to the boys that they should not act in this way as it was upsetting for the girls. The girls were told they should speak-up straight away if it happened again: it was the girls' responsibility to regulate the boys' behaviour.

Repeatedly, parents were called in to discuss their children's behaviour. They were told about these incidents and asked to explain to their children that they

needed to 'keep their hands to themselves'. These types of conversations elicited responses that ranged from dismissive, to ashamed, to aggressive. The boys continued to harass the girls and nobody seemed to know what to do about it.

In these situations, teachers proposed a number of possible causes for the children's sexualised behaviour. Often, they explained it by referring to children's home experiences: what they saw their parents or siblings do, or what the children had seen on television. In one case, a boy in the class was in foster care, having been removed from his family to protect him and his sister from sexual abuse. Some of the parents blamed the fostered boy for encouraging their sons to fondle the girls, even though he was never one of the children identified as being involved in these incidents. He was targeted as having led their innocent boys astray.

Some boys gained an advantage through unwanted touching and chasing. They exerted control over the girls and marginalised those boys who were not part of their small group, who they dared to join them in their activities. It was increasingly the case that these boys gained status and control by performing in a particular way that included sexual harassment of the girls, gaining negative attention from teaching staff and taunting boys who did not join them in their activities.

These episodes piqued my interest and I began to consider the significance of these behaviours in terms of the sexual and gendered identities of the children I was teaching and what these actions meant in terms of gendered power relations. I also began to reflect upon other patterns that had emerged in my interactions with children, staff, parents and carers. For instance, in my role as a class teacher,

parents have frequently complained to me that their little girls (for it was almost always the girls) were growing up too fast, knew 'too much' and were missing out on their childhoods. In my experience, parents of boys rarely made such statements. Parents engaged by teachers about their son's disruptive behaviour, lack of academic focus, obsession with football and harassment of girls would often respond with platitudes about 'boys being boys'. While girls' knowingness was a threat to their innocence, to their very legitimacy as a girl child, this was all just part of being a heterosexual boy. These experiences and interests ultimately led me to undertake this research project at Brookbank Community Primary School (BCP) in the Midlands.

1.2 Research context: the public debate

This research began at a time of heightened public debate regarding the effects on children of sexualisation and commercialisation (Bailey 2011; Byron 2008; 2010, *Crewe Guardian* 2011; Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) 2000, 2006, 2010; Papadopoulos 2010; Pearse 2011; Ross 2010; Wilson 2012; Wintour 2010). The vilification of those who directed their marketing of sexualised images and goods at children came from both feminist and conservative perspectives (e.g. Bailey 2011; Buckingham 2011; Rush and LaNauze 2006). In addition, parent-led online campaigns were mounted to combat the influence of marketing on small children (particularly girls). For example, in 2008 the campaigning organization Pinkstinks was formed, seeking to improve girls' self-esteem, and 'to challenge the 'culture of pink' which values beauty over brains' (Pinkstinks 2011). Similarly, Mumsnet launched its campaign 'Let Girls Be Girls' in early 2010 (Mumsnet n.d.). These websites admonished retailers for their

promotion of gender-stereotyped clothes and toys, “sexualised” clothing marketed to young girls and the placing of “lads’ mags” where they were easily accessible to children. These concerns were also picked up by the media with, for example, investigations into the sale of “inappropriate clothing” by high street retailers regularly appearing in newspapers (*Crewe Guardian* 2011; *Evening Standard* 2010; Williams 2010).

In February 2010, the Conservative Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron, told the BBC: ‘It’s time for action. As parents we all worry about our children growing up too fast and missing out on their childhood’ (BBC 2010: para. 8). With the previous Labour government having already commissioned reviews into the impact of technology on children’s wellbeing (Byron 2008, 2010) and the sexualisation of young people (Papadopoulos 2010), in December 2010 Cameron’s recently formed Coalition Government announced an independent review into the sexualisation of childhood to be chaired by Reg Bailey of the Christian charity the Mothers’ Union. Bailey reported in July of the following year (Bailey 2011; Wintour 2010). As discussed in section 2.3, throughout this public debate, definitions of sexualisation were vague, contradictory and sometimes absent altogether.

While these concerns persisted in the public consciousness, for policy makers the focus shifted to one of child sexual exploitation and lack of institutional effectiveness in child protection (Burford 2017; Burke 2016; Preuss 2017; Tighe 2017). This shift initially arose out of child sexual exploitation scandals in Rotherham and Greater Manchester (Coffey 2014; HM Government 2015; Jay

2014; Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) 2014; The Office of the Children's Commissioner 2015).

Both the sexualisation and sexual exploitation narratives write children (most often girls) as innocent victims at the mercy of a treacherous adult world. Both highlight the need to protect children against predators, be they commercial or physical. It is only more recently that it has been more widely acknowledged that children are often both victims and perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence (e.g. Bradlow *et al* 2017, Falconer 2018; House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee 2016, Ringrose *et al* 2012, *TES* Reporter 2017). Within the context of this study, the discourse of childhood innocence can be identified as having a powerful impact on the views of parents regarding SRE and what they considered to be "appropriate" knowledge.

1.3 Research context: The curriculum

In 2000, the UK government published its statutory *Sex and Relationship Education Guidance* (DfEE 2000). This guidance, applicable to schools in England, was formulated at a time when the main concerns related to SRE were sexual health and teenage pregnancy (Archard 1998, 2000; BBC News 1999; Carabine 2007). By 2012, when qualitative data for this study was produced, this guidance was outdated due to technological developments, changes in social expectations, the passage of new laws (especially with the Civil Partnership Act in 2004), and the introduction of the revised *National Curriculum in England* (Department for Education (DfE) 2013) in 2014.

In its early passages, the document, which applied to teaching and learning through to the end of KS4 (when young people are 16 years old), established some key principles underpinning the SRE curriculum:

It is lifelong learning about physical, moral and emotional development. It is about the understanding of the importance of marriage for family life, stable and loving relationships, respect, love and care. It is also about the teaching of sex, sexuality, and sexual health. It is not about the promotion of sexual orientation or sexual activity – this would be inappropriate teaching.

(DfEE 2000: 5)

It also identified 'three main elements': 'attitudes and values', 'personal and social skills', and 'knowledge and understanding' (DfEE 2000:5). In primary schools, the expectation was that SRE should be regarded as part of non-statutory Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE), and be taught in conjunction with the compulsory science curriculum (DfEE 1999). In terms of knowledge, concepts and skills, the guidance was brief and ill-defined. SRE was to contribute to PSHE and Citizenship provision 'by ensuring that all children:

- develop confidence in talking, listening and thinking about feelings and relationships
- are able to name parts of the body and how their bodies work
- can protect themselves and ask for help and support; and
- are prepared for puberty' (DfEE 2000: 19).

Unlike the statutory subjects that made up the 1999 *National Curriculum*, the guidance did not set out Key Stage expectations in terms of attainment targets or provide detailed guidance on what should be taught in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding. While my colleagues in school usually welcomed a good degree of latitude in what and how they taught, they found the lack of firm steering in SRE unnerving (Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) 2013, ASE 2011). Furthermore, there was no requirement to take account of pre-existing knowledge or to address children's own sexual behaviour.

PSHE, and within that, SRE occupied a unique place within the primary curriculum. While not compulsory, the 2000 non-statutory *Framework for PSHE* was 'linked directly to the aims of the curriculum, arguing that schools could not achieve these aims without PSHE' (QCA 2000, cited in Macdonald 2009: 10). Furthermore, unlike other subjects, the SRE guidance document required that the curriculum be 'developed in consultation with parents and the wider community' and gave parents the right to remove children from SRE lessons (DfEE 2000: 13).

Over time, the 2000 non-statutory guidance did undergo some minor updates (Brook, The PSHE Association and The Sex Education Forum (SEF) 2014) but there has been considerable vacillation on the part of successive administrations about the content and status of SRE, with repeated failed moves to make some form of PSHE and SRE compulsory (DfEE 2000, Long 2015, Macdonald 2009, Westminster Education Forum 2018). Finally, in March 2017, Education Secretary Justine Greening announced that the government had tabled amendments to the

Children and Social Work Bill that would make Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in secondary schools and Relationships Education in primary schools compulsory (DfE and Greening 2017). This new legislation would apply not only to maintained schools, but academies, independent and free schools. The aim was for the new statutory curriculum to come into effect in September 2019.

Following the success of the amendment, the government embarked on a consultation process to explore views on the topics that should be covered and how the guidance should be updated. This included 'round-table sessions with national and local groups representing interested parties such as teachers and other education professionals, subject specialists, parents and religious bodies, as well as engaging with parliamentarians' (DfE 2017c: 3). In addition, two online 'calls for evidence' were announced, firstly, from:

- Parents and carers
- School and college staff (including governors)
- Voluntary and community organisations
- Other educational professionals
- Any other interested organisations and individuals

(DfE 2017c: p.3)

The second call for evidence was from 'young people' (people younger than 19 years but older than 16, unless they had parental permission to participate) (DfE 2017d). This asked young people to reflect upon their own SRE experiences, to identify what was useful and what they would like to have learned more about.

Despite the deadline of September 2019 to commence the new programmes of study, the findings from the consultation process were not released until 19th July 2018 (DfE 2018a), when a further consultation was announced in relation to new draft statutory guidance. In practice, this meant that the proposed introduction of the new compulsory curriculum was moved to September 2020 (DfE 2018b; *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education Regulations* 2019). For primary schools, the new draft statutory guidance (which replaces the 2000 *SRE Guidance* document) for Relationships Education identifies five themes for subject content:

- Families and people who care for me
- Caring friendships
- Respectful relationships
- Online relationships
- Being safe

(DfE 2018a; 2018b: 10-11)

The emphasis here is very much on recognising the characteristics of positive relationships. This should then help children ‘to recognise any less positive relationships when they encounter them’, to know when they are unsafe, and how and where to seek help (DfE 2018a: 15). In addition, the guidance states that the teaching of Health Education, which includes learning about the ‘key facts of puberty’, will become compulsory in primary schools (DfE 2018a: 27). Should primary schools also choose to teach sex education beyond the requirements of

the National Curriculum for Science, the right for parents to withdraw their children from lessons, enshrined in earlier guidance remains (DfEE 2000; DfE 2013; DfE 2018a).

If anything, the new draft guidance has further muddled the waters. PSHE is still not compulsory, yet many of the themes identified as part of Relationships Education are at the core of the PSHE curriculum (DfE 2018a; PSHE Association 2016). Furthermore, the guidance states that primary schools can choose to teach sex education with content that reaches beyond the guidance for Relationships and Health Education, and the Science National Curriculum, but provides limited guidance in this regard. Consequently, curriculum content for primary level SRE was and remains ill-defined, and, at the time this research was undertaken, the legal requirements on primary schools for the teaching of sex education continue to be both minimal and lacking clarity.

1.4 Purpose of this qualitative study

This thesis explores adults' attitudes toward Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) for Key Stage (KS) 1 pupils and examines how these align with the way children of this age (5-7 years) construct, experience and understand their sexuality and gender. Located at the convergence of the sociology of education and childhood and gender studies, this work has been embarked upon from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, additionally it draws upon theoretical work of Raewyn Connell (1987, 1995) and Judith Butler (1990, 1993).

This thesis poses four central questions:

- What are teachers' and parents' / carers' views about what constitutes appropriate SRE for KS1 children?
- What are children's conceptions of and views on gender roles?
- How do children talk about the construction and performance of their gendered and sexual identities within the learning spaces of the classroom and playground?
- To what extent do teachers and parents' / carers' perspectives on children's gendered and sexual development coincide with children's expressed understandings of their gendered and sexual identities?

At my urging, the school in which this study was undertaken was beginning to consider the introduction of SRE in KS1. Seeing SRE as a site where children both develop an understanding of sexuality and gender, and through which they also construct their own sexual and gendered identities, I sought to explore adults' attitudes towards the idea of SRE at a young age and what they considered to be beneficial content. I also wanted to uncover what fuelled these adults' viewpoints and whether their ideas would be in line with children's needs. Often studies ask teachers and parents to reflect upon their experiences of teaching SRE, and while this is also the case here, the central focus when speaking to adults is to gather their perspectives on the future possibilities of a KS1 programme of study, giving adults a 'blank slate' to consider what might be valuable for children and exploring their reasoning. Unlike other studies in this area I have brought the standpoints of parents and teachers together to identify shared feelings, experiences and motivations underpinning these adults' expressed opinions.

Children's and young people's sexual and gendered identities have been the focus of some prior research, including, for example, Renold's (2005) important work examining upper primary school children's sexualities and Thornes' (1993) ethnographic research exploring the way young children construct and police gender identity through play. However, construction of these identities remains under-explored. By talking to children, I aim to extend the understanding of how they frame the ways in which they construct their gendered and sexual identities within the regulatory, heteronormative context of the primary school. I also consider what this means in terms of their lived experiences and implications for practice.

In taking a poststructural feminist approach, I resist the longstanding binary power relationships of child / adult, masculine / feminine, girl / boy and seek to empower children as a marginalised grouping by hearing and valuing their voices. By deconstructing the data gathered from children and adults through focus group interviews, I have made visible the ways groups and individuals discursively situate themselves in terms of childhood, gender, sexuality, parenthood, professional identity and education. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, Raewyn Connell's (1987, 1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity has proved useful in conceptualising power relations within groups of boys and between boys and girls. Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) work has also informed this study, with her assertion of the performativity of gender and the notion of the heterosexual matrix, within which the body, gender and sexuality are 'naturally' aligned. It is this work that has

facilitated the exploration of the hegemonic nature of heterosexuality and provided for the possibility of change.

1.5 Chronology

At the time I began to gather the data for this study I had been working as a primary school teacher for nine years. I was coming to the end of my fourth year working at BCP, which meant I had built relationships with parents, children and staff over a long period of time and knew the community quite well. I continued in my role at the school for the next two years, leaving at the end of the 2014 summer term.

The completion of this study has taken a number of years, during which time (as outlined above) public debate and the legislative landscape underwent a number of changes. The focus group interviews took place in May and June 2012. This was a period when the media and politicians were heavily focused on questions of commercialisation, sexualisation and the loss of childhood innocence. The DfEE's (2000) *SRE Guidance* was in place but had not been reviewed or amended in light of any technological or social changes that had occurred. The *National Curriculum* (DfEE 1999) was under review but was yet to be finalised. While civil partnerships for same sex couples had been established for a number of years, the legal question of marriage equality was not to be resolved until 2013.

Over time, the status of SRE in primary schools has been much debated, as has its title. In more recent years there has been a move away from Sex and Relationships, with relationships coming to the fore with a renaming of the subject as Relationships and Sex Education (DfE 2018a, 2018b). Unless referring to

debates and documents that refer specifically to RSE, throughout this study I have decided to retain the title SRE. I have done so to locate the study in the appropriate moment in time, and maintain consistency and clarity throughout the thesis. The discussions in focus groups were rooted in and informed by the contents of the 2000 (DfEE) *Sex and Relationships Guidance*. Furthermore, the name 'SRE', with the possible perception of the prioritising of 'sex' over relationships might well have coloured participants' perceptions and the way these were expressed in their discussions. (For example, both Mr Heymann and Mrs Waites expressed disquiet about the naming of the subject, worrying that this 'scared' parents.).

1.6 Conclusion and structure

The children in this study drew upon a range of resources to support their understanding and construction of their own gendered and sexual identities. They discussed their "romantic relationships" and their views on gender, and described the ways in which expressions of gender identity were policed through play. What became evident was the importance they placed on their friendships and how they positioned themselves and were positioned by others as girlfriends and boyfriends. It was also clear, I argue, that 'doing' rather than being girl or boy was regulated by heterosexist norms that suffused their school and home lives.

The power of compulsory heterosexuality and the discourse of childhood innocence came through powerfully during the teachers' and parents' group interviews. They wanted children to understand the social world they inhabit and talked about SRE as a vehicle for social change, for example, to combat homophobia and gender stereotyping. At the same time, however, their

attachment to normative heterosexuality meant that they had a restrictive view of possibilities for children's lives. The imbalance of power between adults and children meant that the dominance of parents' rights subsuming children's needs was taken for granted by most of the adult participants.

By placing participant voices at the heart of this thesis, the following chapters demonstrate that the discourse of childhood innocence and (lack of) maturity constrains the development of SRE programmes that would put children at the heart of the teaching. Recurrent themes of gender bias and a heterosexist agenda further undermine the debate, in which the lived experiences of children are perpetually side-lined.

I begin each of the following chapters with a brief vignette to illustrate the multiplicity of ways children do their gendered and sexual identities within the confines of the primary school. These represent an opportunity for me to bring my personal experiences of children's behaviours into the thesis. While all are based on real interactions, these vignettes are most frequently presented as typical or generic incidents that I witnessed in my years as a KS1 teacher. Their purpose is to provide an insight into some of the ways I have witnessed children questioning, exploring and expressing their identities.

The Literature Review, contained in Chapter 2, begins with an exploration of the theoretical foundations of this research. There then follows a discussion of the public and political debate around the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood before moving on to an examination of the literature focused on

parenting and the notion of the vulnerable child. Then childhood innocence, a theme that came through strongly in focus group interviews, is examined, particularly with regard to girls' identities. This is followed by a section on the importance of play as a key site for the development of children's gendered and sexual identities. The final section examines feminist perspectives on sex education, its heterosexist nature, and the way that SRE has been viewed as serving different functions and needing different approaches for girls and boys. Ideas that SRE should be context-specific and employed to identify and tackle imbalances in binary gender power relations are also explored.

The focus of Chapter 3 is an exploration of the methodology, and approach to data production, analysis and evaluation. Here the theoretical underpinnings of the study are also discussed.

Chapter 4 examines teachers' background in teaching and learning SRE. It interrogates their personal experiences, levels of confidence and reservations about teaching the subject in KS1. Since some of these teachers are also parents, this chapter also illustrates some of the tensions that exist in their dual role as teacher and parent.

In Chapter 5, parents' attachment to the notion of childhood innocence and the strain this brings when they also want to prepare their children to live in the wider world and future adulthood is explored. Parents' presumption of and desire for a heterosexual life for their children is also discussed. What comes through clearly in this chapter is the high degree of trust the majority of these parents invest in the

school and in their children's teachers as caring, well-trained and experienced professionals, while acknowledging that other parents might not feel the same way within the context of teaching SRE.

The lives and attitudes of children are the focus for Chapter 6. Here it becomes clear that these children have a reservoir of knowledge and experience that adults (parents and teachers) overlook when considering both the school environment and ethos, and the content and approach to teaching SRE. These children demonstrate that the adults in their lives consistently underestimate their agency in developing gendered and sexual identities, and their depth of commitment to this process. They repeatedly show a sophisticated ability to deconstruct the world around them, drawing on a range of first-hand experiences to develop their own interpretations.

Chapter 7 seeks to identify and revisit recurring themes in the previous three chapters, especially those of innocence and heterosexual hegemony, bringing the voices and opinions of the three sets of participants together.

The concluding chapter draws out some of the most significant findings in terms of challenging adults' perceptions of children's lived experiences, the emotional relevance and importance in terms of the status of children's relationships, and the ways they do gender and construct their sexuality. Teachers' and parents' views, experiences and motivations are also brought together. The alignment of gender, age and innocence is an important theme within these findings, as is the strong pull of heteronormativity. Finally, I consider, in a broad way, the implications for

policy and practice. I identify the need for policymakers, parents / carers and schools to see children for who they are, rather than for who they want them to be, and to use this as a realistic starting point for the development and delivery of a truly beneficial and progressive SRE curriculum.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

It was not unusual for children to identify themselves as girlfriends or boyfriends. However, this sometimes resulted in heartache and tears when children perceived themselves to have been replaced in their relationships:

Hannah sat sobbing in the quiet area of the playground, refusing to speak to her best friend, Kayleigh. Later, she explained that she was upset because Freddy was her boyfriend but he had invited Kayleigh to his birthday party instead of her.

2.1 Introduction

This review begins with an examination of theoretical perspectives that have informed the formulation of my research questions, my thinking in terms of research design and transaction, and the analysis, interpretation and presentation of data. In section 2.3, I then move on to the question of childhood innocence, sexualisation and commercialisation within the literature, beginning with government sponsored reviews and reports as these were both prompted by and fuelled public discussion via the media; as such this literature is most likely to have had an impact on the thinking of the adult participants in this study. Section 2.4 explores the relationship between public perceptions of a threat to childhood innocence, parenting styles and their possible impacts on parents and children. I return once more to the question of childhood innocence and sexuality as

addressed from a scholarly perspective, in Section 2.5. It is here that a more nuanced, research-driven approach is illuminated, and the intersection of gender and class are touched upon. As play is an integral part of children's lives and playtimes arguably when they are least directly regulated by adults, I then explore research on the gendered nature of play and its place in children's active construction of their gender and sexual identities. Finally, I address the scholarly debate on the position and nature of SRE. I undertake this from a largely feminist perspective due to the social marginalisation of children as a group, the connection of the SRE debate to gendered power relations, and the construction and performance of children's gendered and sexual identities.

2.2 Gender identities and theory

Raewyn Connell's (1987, 1989, 1995, 2000) work on masculinities and poststructuralist feminist theory as presented by writers like Bronwyn Davies (1989a, 1989b, 1993) Valerie Walkerdine (1989, 1993, 1997, 1998) and Carrie Paechter (2018), alongside Butler's (1990, 1993) theories of performativity and the heterosexual matrix have been widely employed to explore gender and, to a lesser extent, sexual identity in the classroom (e.g. Benjamin 2003; Connolly 1998; Meyenn and Parker 2011; Reay 2003; Renold 2005; Ringrose and Renold 2010; Swain 2000, 2003, 2004). Although these approaches are built upon differing theoretical foundations, I have found them useful in conceptualising gender and sexual identities and social relationships in school.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, second wave feminists have both adapted and challenged essentialist ideas of sex / gender difference, with a social

constructionist view of gender roles gaining ground and offering the prospect of change in the roles of women and men (see Beasley 2005; Francis 2006; Richardson 2000). Oakley's (1972) distinction between biological sex and culturally constructed gender opened up new possibilities. Although retaining a conservative acceptance of a society ordered around a binary sex / gender division, she argued against the idea that the roles of women and men are natural. Consequently, if gender behaviours are learned then they can be remodelled. The social construction of gender roles, whereby individuals learn socially acceptable patterns of behaviour and attitudes in line with their biologically assigned sex, through imitation and the application of rewards and sanctions, proved to be an important theoretical resource for those attempting to redress the gender imbalance of western societies and paved the way for further study focusing on uneven gender relations.

During this period, some feminist scholars and teachers began to theorise and take action with the aim of disrupting existing power relations within education. For example, Spender (1982) located herself within a long tradition of women writers who highlight male domination of an education system that serves as a tool of patriarchy. She pointed out that an education system where the standards are set by men, where these are seen as the norm, and in which women are repeatedly painted as 'lesser' and propelled towards failure, safeguards men's prime position in schools, colleges and workplaces. She went on to describe attempts to redress the balance and advocate the development of 'women's education that is woman-made' (Spender 1982: 161). However, such an approach failed to acknowledge agency on the part of individuals developing their own sex / gender identities and

underestimated the tenacity of prevailing gender-based power dynamics. As Arnot (1991: 448) pointed out:

The simplicity of its portrayal of the process of learning and of gender identity formation, its assumptions about the nature of stereotyping, its somewhat negative view of girls as victims had all contributed to the creation of particular school-based strategies. These strategies, although designed to widen girls' and boys' horizons, and give them more opportunities in life were somewhat idealistic in intention and naïve in approach.

After all, as Connell (1989) noted, if girls' and women's sex roles are constrained so too are those of boys and men, who are likely to resist attempts to undermine their privileged position.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity has proven to be a useful way of thinking about power relations between boys in the classroom and playground, in addition to considering the power dynamics between girls and boys. Crucially, this theory makes space for power relations to exert themselves within, as well as between, genders. Thus, she challenged the perspective that any variation from "the norm" should be viewed in terms of individual deviance. Connell's early work built upon feminist concepts of patriarchy and gender and served to undercut elements of sex role theory, thereby providing for possible change arising out of challenging the uneven distribution of power between genders. Drawing upon ethnographic studies of men in a range of contexts, she also began to take

account of the intersection of class, race and gender (Carrigan *et al* 1985; Connell 1987; Demetriou 2001; Messerschmidt 2018). Furthermore, Connell went on to attack social determinism that asserts the notion of the body as a blank canvas upon which an individual's gender is drawn by social conventions (Connell 1995).

Nonetheless, echoing the work of Foucault (1991, 1998), for Connell (1995: 52) the body is an 'inescapable' social marker of gender and position within a gender-based hierarchy. In *Masculinities* (Connell, 1995), the importance of sport and sporting hierarchies were explored, themes which other writers also echo (Connolly 1995; Swain 2000, 2003, 2004; Renold 1997). Here performance is all-important, with those "at the top" using their bodies to maintain their privileged position in relation to lesser men and all women. While few meet the criteria for a leading sportsman, and those who do face contradictions within the hegemonic form of masculinity they are regarded as epitomizing, their dominant position remains intact. Indeed, it is the alternative forms of masculinity and femininities combined, that highlight and thereby fortify the hegemonic.

Thanks to hegemonic masculinity, the vast majority of men reap rewards in relation to women (Connell 1987). However, from her earliest work Connell argued that the hegemonic, idealised form of masculinity is occupied fully by only a few (Connell 1987). Other men occupy other forms of masculinity: complicit masculinities reap the benefits of hegemonic masculinity but do not fully take on its characteristics; subordinate masculinities, most obviously gay masculinities are often equated to femininity, and marginalized masculinities are dominated due to the intersection of gender with class, race, ethnicity, and so on (Connell 1995, 2000). Within marginalised masculinity, intersectionality plays a particularly

important and fluctuating or contradictory role in the space an individual occupies. For example, stereotypical working-class male traits, such as engaging in manual labour, heavy drinking and aggression, may be highly valued, while limited economic resources are frowned upon. Therefore, Donaldson, in his exploration of hegemonic masculinity noted:

Through hegemonic masculinity most men benefit from the control of women. For a very few men, it delivers control of other men. To put it another way, the crucial difference between hegemonic masculinity and other masculinities is not the control of women, but the control of men . . . (Donaldson 1993: 656)

While Connell's work has been highly influential and utilised within the fields of masculinity and gender studies, over time it has also increasingly been the subject of criticism and modification from a number of quarters (e.g. Anderson 2007; Demetriou 2001; Rasmussen 2009; Swain 2006). For example, Rasmussen is reluctant to accept the idea underpinning Connell's (1987) concept of emphasized femininity 'that *all* femininities are rendered powerless *relative to all* masculinities' (Rasmussen 2009: 435). Demetriou (2001) charged that Connell fails to acknowledge the constructive relationship between hegemonic masculinity and subordinate or marginalized masculinities and femininities.

In later work, Connell discussed some of the ambiguities and inconsistencies inherent in using masculinity / masculinities as a framework for understanding relationships and identities (Connell 2000; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Here the impact of the use of 'men', and by extension 'women' is pondered, conceding the restrictive nature of such terms. There is also an acknowledgement of the importance of relationships between genders, of taking account of the significance of intersectionality, and of recognising that "masculinity" represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 841).

The theory of hegemonic masculinity and the significance of the body have been utilised by those seeking to demonstrate the importance of the school setting in the production of masculine identity (Renold 1997, 2001, 2004, 2007; Skelton 1997; Swain 2000, 2003, 2004, 2006). These authors' research illuminated the ways in which boys in both primary and secondary schools establish themselves within a masculine hierarchy through sport, aggression and the wearing of particular clothing. Being good at football and showing themselves to be knowledgeable about sport is key cultural capital for boys. However, this work also demonstrated that the precise forms of these demonstrations of masculinity were dependent upon the resources available to the boys within their institutional settings.

Despite the use of these concepts to illustrate the importance of school as a site for the production of masculinities, Connell was more sceptical about its significance. Beginning to highlight the importance of socio-economic backgrounds in relation to academic performance, Connell (1989) did not deny that school is an important institution for constructing masculinity but, having interviewed adult men about their lives, concluded that it was not the *most*

important. For Connell, outside influences played a more substantial role in how young men both constructed their masculine identities and reacted to schooling. While many (“failing”) working class boys resisted the system, other boys from more privileged backgrounds, embraced a more responsible form of masculinity that served them well in both social and educational terms.

Although Connell has expressed doubts regarding the importance of schooling, hegemonic masculinity has been a useful concept for those seeking to explain the development of gendered identities in the young and the power relationships among boys, and between boys and girls. Those seeking to undermine the tendency of the media and government to portray boys as a homogeneous group failing educationally at the hands of women have been able to utilise Connell’s ideas to demonstrate the complexity of gender relations and have gone some way ‘to challenge the view that in millennial Britain it is boys rather than girls who are relatively disadvantaged’ (Reay 2001:154).¹

Within Connell’s work the concept of hegemonic femininity was rejected due to women’s subordination to men. Instead, Connell (1987) referred to emphasised femininity. Promoted through advertising, newspaper, and other media, emphasized femininity exists to serve men’s power rather than to exert itself over other forms of femininity. It is this form of femininity that nearly 20 years later Paechter (2006b: 255) describes as ‘super-girly’. Femininity, within this dualistic model, lacks power and as such cannot be hegemonic. However, as Paechter

¹ For brief discussions of the way boys’ underachievement has been portrayed see Foster, Kimmel and Skelton (2001) and Skelton (1995).

(2018) points out, while masculinity has been the subject of much theorisation, femininity has not received the same treatment. In attempting to begin to fill this theoretical hole, Paechter returns to the work of Gramsci (1971 cited in Paechter 2018) and melds this with Foucault's (1977, 1978, 1980, 1982 cited in Paechter 2018: 123) conceptualisation of 'complex power relations.' This enables her to advance the possibility of the co-construction of hegemonic femininity and hegemonic masculinity. In this model, both hegemonic femininity and hegemonic masculinity are localised and contextual, and serve to maintain the *status quo* in terms of the gender order (Paechter 2018: 124). These hegemonic forms can be seen as 'aspirational' and within this the hegemonic form of femininity does not need to conform to longstanding stereotypes that recall an 'idealised' version of the 1950s housewife. This form of femininity can be strong and independent, for example, but still maintain masculine-feminine power relations.

Paechter (2018) moves on to apply her early theoretical considerations (for she acknowledges that these ideas need further work) to her previous ethnographic work with primary school children as part of the Tomboy Identities Project (Paechter and Clark 2007a, 2007b; Paechter 2010). In this she demonstrates the utility of these ideas when examining the power dynamics between two groups of children ('cool' girls and 'cool' boys) and illustrates some of the ways in which they maintained dominance over others. However, despite the cool girls' power over other girls, she demonstrates that they continued to be unable to undermine prevailing gender relations.

Writing from a feminist poststructuralist perspective (see Weedon 1987) both Valerie Walkerdine (1989, 1993, 1997, 1998) and Bronwyn Davies (1989a, 1989b, 1993) provided a counter to the view that sex roles are fixed, and denied the homogeneity of both male and female. Feminist poststructuralism questions the simplistic binaries and power structures embedded in patriarchy. Rather than stable and coherent, individual subjects are considered to be fluid, unstable and contradictory. The subject is constituted and re-constituted through discourses including, for example, discourses of gender and age. Language, social institutions and social interactions are all scrutinised to identify, understand and challenge those power structures that ensure the subordination of particular groups (Davies and Banks 1995; Gavey 1989; Francis 2001; Weedon 1987).

Like Connell, Walkerdine and Davies saw male and female, masculinity and femininity, as relational, and discursively constituted in opposition to one another. Davies used a poststructuralist framework of analysis to interrogate the construction of young children's gendered identities. She explored the prospect of an alternative discourse 'where social practice is not defined in terms of the set of genitals they happen to have' (Davies 1989b: 167), where the feminine is not subordinated and where the possibility to move beyond binary subjectivities is made real (Davies 1989a, 1989b, 1993; Davies and Hunt 1994). Building on these ideas, Davies sought to promote equal opportunities through the presentation of active roles for girls and women via non-traditional texts and alternative pedagogies (Davies 1989, 1993).

Similarly, Walkerdine's work focused on gender, class and education, illuminated the localised discursive practices that signify femininity, attributed agency to children and provided for the possibility of change (Walkerdine 1989, 1993, 1997, 1998; Walkerdine *et al* 2001). For example, in her 1989 work 'Femininity as performance', she unpacked some of the foundational ideas underpinning child-centred pedagogy and some of the myths associated with girls' and boys' academic performance. For Walkerdine (1989), the actual outcomes for children were less important than the meanings attributed to them. She asserted that in a system where exploratory play and discovery learning are valorised, children are positioned as active and teachers (usually female teachers of young children) are positioned as passive. Simultaneously, play is discursively framed in opposition to work, and within that dichotomy boys are associated with play and girls with work. This places girls in a "no win" situation, in which their achievements are always 'downgraded or dismissed' (Walkerdine 1989: 268). For girls who perform well in school, particularly in those subjects traditionally viewed as masculine, this is attributed to hard work rather than cleverness. Meanwhile, boys' innate qualities – their brilliance and aptitude – are valued and used to account for their successes. For boys who achieve poorly, there is always a "good" reason: they have potential, and are "bright" but lack focus, have other interests, boys will be boys etc. For girls in the same position there is no redemption because their failure can only be due to their lack of hard work, for they have nothing else to draw upon.

Exploring the ways children's gender identities are discursively and oppositionally produced, both Walkerdine's (1989, 1993, 1997, 1998) and Davies' (1989a, 1989b, 1993) work have proved useful within the context of this study. Additionally,

the notion of individuals' adopting alternative, sometimes contradictory, subjectivities depending on context (positioning rather than roles), have proved to be useful concepts for unpacking the views and behaviours of participants within this localised study, as has the proposition of agency (Davies and Harré 1990).

The heterosexist nature of the primary school has been illuminated through the theoretical work of Judith Butler. Butler's work is rooted in an eclectic range of scholarly traditions that in her 1999 introduction to *Gender Trouble* she referred to as 'intellectual promiscuity' (Butler, 1990: x). Drawing on literary and psychoanalytic theory, theology and philosophy, she has greatly influenced writers focusing on the subject of gender identity. Butler's (1988, 1990) concepts of 'performativity' and the 'heterosexual matrix' (later 'heterosexual hegemony') have served many well when examining the nature and construction of the gendered subject.

In *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990), she asserted the importance of discourse in the manifestation of sex, gender and sexuality as apparently natural and universal phenomena. For Butler, the subject does not perform gender; rather, it is already existent and elucidated through a series of (repeated) acts promoted and constrained via the heterosexual matrix for, like Adrienne Rich, she viewed heterosexuality as 'compulsory' (Rich 1980). Individuals are not their gender, rather they 'do' gender. As such, there is also within the matrix the possibility, indeed the necessity, for subversion. By stepping outside the perceived norms there is an opportunity for the current binaries to be undermined and redefined. However, in doing so these norms may also serve to reinforce the heterosexual

matrix by serving a 'policing' function, an opportunity to expose the 'Other' that helps to maintain the *status quo*.

In an effort to address the notion that the conflation of sex and gender in *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990) denied the importance or even the existence of the material body, Butler responded with *Bodies That Matter* (Butler 1993). Here, she also attempted to allay the fears of those who saw her vision of the discursive construction of 'woman' as politically problematic, explaining her view that:

. . . the category of women does not become useless through deconstruction, but becomes one whose uses are no longer reified as "referents", and which stand a chance of being opened up, indeed, of coming to signify in ways that none of us can predict in advance. Surely, it must be possible both to use the term, to use it tactically even as one is, as it were, used and positioned by it, and also to subject the term to a critique which interrogates the exclusionary operations and differential power-relations that construct and delimit feminist evocations of "women". (Butler 1993: 5)

In just this way it is also important to employ terms like 'queer' in the fight against homophobia.

The introduction of 'race' as a discursively produced identity is an important element of *Bodies That Matter*. It is only relatively recently that those conducting research into gender identity have begun to address the intersection of gender and

race (and class) (Ali 2003; Connell 1987; Connolly 1995; Graham and Robinson 2004; Holland 1995; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Shain 2003; Walkerdine *et al* 2001). Rather than accepting the primacy of gender over other forms of identity, Butler claimed that:

. . . though there are clearly good historical reasons for keeping “race” and “sexuality” and “sexual difference” as separate analytical spheres, there are also quite pressing and significant historical reasons for asking how and where we might read not only their convergence, but the sites at which the one cannot be constituted save through the other.
(Butler 1993: 123)

For Butler, race, gender and sexuality are inseparable, each intersecting with the other to constitute and define identity.

Butler’s interpretation of Freudian theory, an inferred absence of agency in her theories, the repeated use of the terms heterosexual hegemony suggesting universality, and her ideas concerning subversion have rightly been the subject of criticism (Atkinson and DePalma 2009; Connell 2000; Hood-Williams and Harrison 1998; Hughes and Witz 1997). However, even if her work does implicitly call into question the legitimacy of gender as a political and analytical tool, it still provides a solid theoretical foundation for many researchers.

A number of researchers working in schools, and examining links between gender, sexuality and childhood innocence have drawn upon Butler’s theories to inform

their analysis (Allan *et al* 2010; Connolly 1995; Dixon 1997, Epstein and Johnson 1998; Epstein *et al* 2001; Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2001; Martino 1999; Mills 2001; Renold 2001, 2002, 2005, 2007; Walkerdine 1997; Wallis and VanEvery 2000; Warren 1997). I have, similarly been influenced by Butler's rejection of essentialism, her assertion that sex, gender and sexuality are produced discursively, and her argument that we 'do' gender.

It has been explicitly argued that researchers should further question the ways in which we use femininity and masculinity as an analytical framework that might detrimentally serve to promote the linkage of the sexed body with the production of gender identity and of stereotypes, and reinforce uneven relationships within and between genders (e.g. Francis 2010, 2012; Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2012; Paechter 2012, 2018). These concerns have led to the theoretical exploration of alternative approaches to the conceptualisation of sexed and gendered identities.

One suggested approach to addressing these tensions from a poststructuralist perspective came from Becky Francis (2012). Francis returned to Bakhtin's work on literary criticism and semiotics (1981 cited in Francis 2012) and employed his concepts of *heteroglossia* and *monoglossia* to gender. The dominant, monoglossic, account of gender is founded in a dualistic model, which locates 'male / masculine as Subject' and 'female / feminine as Other' (Francis 2012: 5). In this "common sense" model, Francis explained, masculinity is identified and valued as 'rational, strong, active' while, conversely, femininity is 'emotional, weak [and] passive' (Francis 2012: 5). However, the apparent overarching truth of this account camouflages the true complexity and instability of gender production.

Engaging with these concepts, Francis demonstrated, might allow us to step away from an essentialist binding of the body to gender (and sexual) identity while still taking account of the linkage between the two within the existing social structure and enabling a more complex account of gender. Given the starting point for these concepts, this approach also seems appropriate when deconstructing participants' use of language and utterances.

The terms masculinity and femininity are not entirely rejected by those who have embarked on this discussion. Rather, scholars are asking important questions about the impact of their use, while simultaneously acknowledging their potential salience for current and complex analysis of social relations. Thus, research located in primary schools, like that of Skelton *et al* (2009), has demonstrated this framework holds meaning for children trying to negotiate their own identities and their place within the social context of the school, as well as for their parents and teachers. Furthermore, as Youdell (2004: 481) pointed out, gender categorisation carries with it meanings that 'constitute the subject' while simultaneously allowing for the troubling of these normative identities. With this in mind, I have chosen to continue to utilise these terms, while simultaneously attempting to look beyond a straightforward gender binary and recognise the fluidity and complexity of individuals' expressions of identity and positioning in relation to one another. In this way, I aim to lay open the ways in which a particular group of children at BCP construct their gender and sexual identities, and how these are perceived by both parents and teachers.

2.3 Growing up too soon: the public and political discourse of commercialisation and sexualisation

The need to protect childhood innocence is a much-repeated refrain in public discourse and is frequently linked with discussions of sexualisation and commercialisation. However, the position of the innocent child (most frequently girls) is far from straightforward, with children simultaneously drawn as passive potential victims, but with inherent sexual urges that might be awakened with just a little coaxing or knowledge, and, on some occasions as active agents of a dangerous, youthful sexuality. These contradictory perspectives mean that there is a narrow tightrope for children to walk if they are to avoid the censure of both adults and their peers.

Adults' widely held belief in children as non-sexual innocents and the need to protect them from the loss of that innocence is comprehensively documented (Kehily 2012; McGinn *et al* 2016; Robinson 2008, 2010, 2013), and promoted by writers and publishers of parenting guides. In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature instructing parents how to protect their children from growing up too soon, becoming victims of marketing promoting 'adult' goods to children and an entertainment culture with sex at its heart (Levin and Kilbourne 2009). Some authors have also focused on defending little girls against the onslaught of messages that promote hyperfemininity as the ideal (Carey 2015; Orenstein 2011). These may be written from a range of perspectives, but their proliferation demonstrates the prevalence of fear among adults that children are losing their innocence and being moulded into "problematic" versions of girl and, sometimes, boy. However, as Danielle Egan (2013) claimed in her textual analysis

of assumptions regarding the sexualisation of girls, these are also rooted in a defence of white, middle-class conventions and tend to deny children's agency in constructing their gender and sexual identities.

A number of government-sponsored reports have also been produced in the UK, Australia and the USA, some of which mirror the "common-sense" approach of popular literature on the subject (APA 2007; Bailey 2011; Byron 2008, 2010; Buckingham *et al* 2010; Papadopolous 2010; Rush and La Nauze 2006). Standing out among these is the work of Buckingham *et al* (2010), undertaken for the Scottish Parliament by a team of experienced and well-regarded researchers in this field. The research focused on sexualised goods and did not have the remit of producing policy recommendations. Within this report, Buckingham *et al* undertook a concise literature review, clearly set out and evaluated their own broad terms of analysis and were explicit in their description of their research design. Significantly, in addition to gathering data by surveying retail outlets and through parent focus group interviews, young people aged 12-14 years were asked to participate via classroom-based activities and interviews.

The young participants in Buckingham *et al*'s study emerged as active, critical consumers who wanted to 'fit in' with their peers while still developing their own individuality. Clothing was important in terms of building their identity. In their choices, they tended to want to occupy a 'middle ground' that shifted over time, and between groups and locations (Buckingham *et al* 2010: 67). This was particularly important for girls, who tended to judge each other and be judged more harshly than boys. Dressing 'sexy' was a minefield. Sometimes, individual items

of clothing could be viewed as acceptable or not depending on how they were worn and who was wearing them and transgressions could lead to the label 'chav', with its attendant class connotations. Young people also felt strongly that sexy clothing and make-up put girls at risk from older boys and men, and this led to a good deal of victim blaming in the course of discussions (a view similarly expressed by some of the study's parent participants and strongly refuted by the report's authors).

Neither parents nor children expressed a real desire for government intervention or regulation. The young people who took part thought they should be able to make their own decisions about what they purchased and what they wore; it was the role of parents to ensure that younger children were guided in their choices and taught to be responsible. Similarly, parents considered themselves to be the best judges of what was good for their children, and expected them to develop into adulthood by gradually assuming greater responsibility for themselves and making their own choices as they entered their teenage years. The discourse of childhood innocence featured in discussions with parents but, as is often the case, this meant different things to different parents with some interpreting 'experimenting with make-up, even imitating 'sexy' dance styles (and similar behaviour) as innocuous, fun, and devoid of adult sexual connotations' (Buckingham *et al*: 6). What came through repeatedly throughout was the different standards applied to girls and boys.

The conclusions drawn in Buckingham *et al*'s (2010) report are important in demonstrating these young people's critical engagement with the world around

them, their attitudes toward their peers and their views on the role of parents. However, while they did seek the views of young people, there exists within this report a significant vacuum in terms of the perspectives of primary-aged children and their parents. Furthermore, although some of the research was conducted in school-based settings, the subject of the impact of the educational system was not considered. These are significant areas that I seek to address in this thesis.

At the time of gathering data for this thesis, the reports that parents were most likely to have heard about were those of Papadopolous (2010) and Bailey (2011); as such these were the most likely to have had an impact on parent's perceptions. These reports were issued at a time when sexualisation and commercialisation were repeatedly discussed in the media, and their findings and proposals were widely reported in the press (Casciani 2010; Dustin and Fae 2011; Nuathor 2010; Poulter 2010; Wallop 2011a, 2011b). In contrast to Buckingham *et al's* (2010) report, both Papadopolous' *Sexualisation of Young People Review* and Bailey's *Letting Children be Children* have been the subjects of stinging criticism from within the academy (Barker and Duchinsky 2012; Bragg 2012; Bragg *et al* 2011; Clark 2013; Duchinsky and Barker 2013; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Smith and Attwood 2011; Smith 2010).

Papadopolous (2010: 4) claimed that she wanted 'all boys and girls, to grow up confident about who they are and about finding and expressing their individuality, but not through imposed gender stereotypes or in a way that objectifies the body or commodifies their burgeoning sexuality'. This seems a reasonable enough

desire, as does her interest in addressing the issue of violence against women. However, her failure to make substantive, evidence-based links between sexualisation (ill-defined) and violence, her reliance on a depiction of the innocent child that is concurrently homogenous and drawing upon white middle-class values, and her failure to properly consider children's active engagement with the media in all its forms, served to undermine her proposed intent (see Duchinsky and Barker 2013; Smith 2010; Smith and Attwood 2011). In this Papadopolous' report might be seen as a prime example of presenting the type of imagery described by Walkerdine (1997) in *Daddy's Girl*. Furthermore, while she lamented that 'Hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity posit heterosexuality as the norm, influencing attitudes towards homosexuality in schools and beyond' Papadopolous' review seems suffused with a quiet acceptance of normative heterosexuality; her work is embedded firmly within the confines of the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990; Papadopolous 2010: 43).

On the other hand, the *Bailey Review* (2011) did address the issue of innocence head-on, suggesting that there are two prevailing viewpoints: that children need to be protected from a 'nasty' world that they will one day be ready to enter, or that children should be taught to 'understand and navigate . . . the commercialised and sexualised world' (Bailey 2011: 10). Bailey rejected both perspectives and proposed a third way combining the first two approaches.

For Bailey, parents are both experts in what is best and must assume the mantle of responsibility for their children. Indeed, the report all but excluded the voices of children. Within the report, academic research was dismissed as contradictory and

inconclusive. Yet, despite the public debate and political rhetoric, Bailey conceded that: 'Worries about the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood are not likely to be their [parents'] most immediate priority as they bring up their children. However, it becomes clear that, when asked, many parents believe that their children do face these pressures' (Bailey 2011: 7). Only when parents were pointedly asked about these issues did they express concern. Furthermore, as Martens, Southerton and Scott (2004) explained, within the field of the sociology of consumption, there is a dearth of work focused on children. This means that, just as with sexualisation, there are numerous assumptions but little real understanding of what "commercialisation" really means when discussing children. The emphasis on parents and a failure to understand children as consumers, led Bailey to overlook the importance of the commercial world for children. For example, as noted above, when children's and young people's peer group hierarchies are explored it becomes clear that in some contexts owning and displaying particular brands and types of clothing helps them to position themselves (reflexively) and others (interactively) within certain dominant, marginalised or subordinate groups (Buckingham *et al* 2010; Connell 1995; Davies and Harré 1990; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Reay 2001; Renold 2005; Swain 2003; Tyler 2008). By only addressing parents' 'priorities' Bailey failed to acknowledge the agency of children in constructing their own identities and placed parents' rights above those of their children (Bailey 2010: 7).

Parents did express worries about 'early sexualisation' in two key areas – media and music – when specifically prompted (Jones *et al* 2011: 4). They were concerned about content that was:

- inappropriately sexually suggestive
- illustrating the value or role of women as sexual only
- models, or child models presented as older than their age group
- glamorising or normalising 'deviant' behaviour.

They were also unhappy about 'Products, clothes and toys / giveaways which encourage children to think of themselves (and others to think of children) as adult or sexual (e.g. bras, revealing clothes, word 'sexy' on children's clothes, make up)' (Jones *et al* 2011: 4-5). As Duchinsky and Barker (2013: 738) noted, Bailey proceeds to lay out 'his own moral and policy claims' upon a foundation of parental angst. For Bailey, it was important for business to be given the opportunity to self-regulate and to respond to market forces, so parents needed to accept their part in regulating demand for undesirable products.

Parents did see gender stereotyping of products as problematic. However, despite his emphasis on parental wisdom and responsibility, Bailey was relatively dismissive of these concerns. Again, he argued on behalf of business and claimed that gender stereotyping occurs due to 'customer demand' and might even be 'developmentally necessary' (Bailey 2011: 48-49). Indeed, in this review, the pink for girls, blue for boys divide was couched in positive terms in one of the presented case studies, where the repackaging of a chemistry set in pink and its re-labelling as a craft activity led to a considerable increase in sales. Although the underlying intentions of the authors might well have been quite different, both Bailey's (2011) and Papadopolous' (2010) reports have contributed to and have given legitimacy

to fears that children are being deprived of the innocent childhoods that are their right. This adds fuel to the arguments of those who reject those children who exhibit any sexual behaviours as in some way aberrant and supports the view that sex education for children represents a danger.

Within these government-backed reports there was a strong tendency to portray children, particularly girls, as passive consumers of a 'sexualised' goods and media. They were denied active engagement and the agency to make their own meanings when presented with a whole range of products. Likewise, they were drawn as largely passive in the building of their identities, and frequently depicted in the role of victim within a proposed causal relationship based on common sense rather than evidence. This developmental approach to children also provided the rationale for denying children the knowledge that might be sexually corrupting in some ill-defined manner.

Within Papadopolous' (2010) and Bailey *et al's* (2011) reports children, the group that they professed to be working for, remained at the margins, as did the voices of LGBT+ communities. What came through are the voices of business and parents. The work of Walkerdine (1989, 1993, 1997, 1998), Davies (1989a, 1989b, 1990; Davies and Harré 1990) and Butler (1990, 1993), however, provide a framework for analysis that counters this approach. By interrogating the ways in which sexual and gender identities are discursively produced and acknowledging the agency of children we are able to move toward a clearer understanding of sexuality as part of children's identities. Butler's work also facilitates an alternative

reading of gender than is presented in these reports, allowing for the possibility of a disruption of gendered power relations.

2.4 The vulnerable child and the paranoid parent

At a time when childhood has come to be viewed as under threat there has been a move toward the idealisation of a particular style of parenting. This has been variously described as 'intensive', 'intrusive' and 'paranoid' (Fairclough 2014; Furedi 2002; Hays 1996; Shirani *et al* 2012). Writers like Hays (1996) and Furedi (2002) have explored this phenomenon along with its negative impact on parents (in Hays' case, mothers) and their children.

Prefiguring much of the media and political focus on a threatened childhood in the UK, Hays (1996), in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, reviewed the historical and ideological foundations of intensive mothering, and examined a range of popular parenting manuals, before exploring the findings of her own interviews with 38 mothers in the USA. Here she illuminated mothers' fears about the ways they parent their children in an emotionally and physically risky environment. To be a 'good' or 'successful' mother, as a range of experts informed them, these women realised that there was an expectation that they seek and follow the advice of parenting experts. Experts guided them to devote an inordinate amount of time, money, and emotional energy in their children. Although the women in this small-scale study did not always live up to the ideal of the selfless mother engaged in child-centred parenting, they frequently claimed to strive for this and invested in this image of motherhood to bolster their own identities. Ironically, while expert perspectives laud the mothering role,

engendering it with status, their portrayal of what a mother should be simultaneously acts as a benchmark by which mothers' "success" or "failure" can be measured, presenting women with something of a double-edged sword.

The ideas laid out in Hays' work have been further examined and developed by other writers who have attacked parental reliance on the word of "experts" and claimed that the form of intensive parenting advocated in popular publications is detrimental to the lives of children and parents alike (Furedi 2001; Kehily 2010; Pain 2006; Shirani *et al* 2012; Stokes 2009). Writing in a period when children were portrayed by the media, politicians and academics as 'at risk' (contrasted with a rose-tinted view of past childhoods), Furedi (2001) reflected that it was the disintegration of a culture where adults felt they could rely on one another to protect and guide their children that led to a form of parenting stemming from a fear that the worst things imaginable would happen unless they were constantly vigilant.

In this environment, every adult is regarded as a potential predator and every adult fears that they will be viewed as such, thereby inhibiting communal care of children and giving rise to a disproportionate level of suspicion amongst parents that leads them to "parent" to an unreasonable degree. This level of anxiety, Furedi (2001) argued, is not justifiable as children are in many ways safer than they ever have been before. For Furedi, road traffic accidents involving children, for example, are less numerous than previously, children are healthier than ever before and fears of abuse are exaggerated. Nonetheless, parents take an overly 'precautionary approach to parenting' that in past times might have been viewed as over-

protective but today is seen as 'a virtue' (Furedi 2001: 6-7). Lack of parents' self-confidence and deference to experts within this type of parenting culture are characteristics to be explored within this study when examining parents' willingness for schools to teach their children about sex and relationships.

Within this body of literature, parents want to keep children safe and to fully equip them with a range of skills that would serve them well in the future (to help them get into the right school then university, and ultimately to be employed in the "best" jobs). This, it has been argued, has led to a move from children playing away from the home, unsupervised by adults, to a situation in which outdoor play is most likely to be experienced in the private space of family gardens. Consequently, parents now take far more control over children's leisure time enrolling them in a range of adult-led activities (Furedi 2002; O'Brien *et al.* 2000; Pain 2006; Stokes 2009; Valentine and McKendrick 1997). While much of the literature refers to 'parents' (by implication *all* parents), what is evident here is that the focus is particularly professional, educated, middle-class parents who invest in their children with a view to guaranteeing a middle-class future that potentially excludes other groups.

Children living in poverty or in tumultuous family situations have been at the heart of government policy to overcome risk, for example through *Every Child Matters* (HM Treasury 2003) and the *Parenting Early Intervention Programme* (Lindsay *et al* 2011), yet within the literature, this model of parenting excludes the very groups generally considered to be the most vulnerable. These groups tend not to be consumers of parenting manuals and are often constrained in their ability to

respond to expert advice by their lack of resources. We are presented here with the paradox that in communities where children are most likely to be perceived as genuinely at risk there is the least likelihood of engagement with advice, well-founded or otherwise (Nelson 2010 cited in Fairclough 2014; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997).

Reporting on a two-year study using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to elicit parents' attitudes toward children's play, Valentine and McKendrick (1997) noted that children's experience of intensive parenting and the restrictions it places upon them, is far from uniform. The intersection of class, gender and ethnicity is evident in this realm. Furthermore, some of the fears parents have for their children's safety are, they claimed, quite realistic. Indeed, children themselves can identify situations and places where they are likely to be at risk (Pain 2006). It is important to note that arguments like that of Furedi's (2001) ignored the possibility that some of the improved outcomes for children that he cites as reasons not to be overly concerned about their well-being may well, in fact, have been consequences of the type of parenting he denounced. It is also the case that Furedi was writing at a time prior to a plethora of large-scale historic child abuse scandals focused on prominent figures located in trusted organisations like the BBC, Church of England and children's care homes.

Within this study, the model of the paranoid parent will be explored in relation to the freedoms afforded children and the restrictions placed upon them. As will be demonstrated later in this thesis, parent participants in this study certainly did regulate their children's access to unsupervised, outdoor play and their interaction

with other children. There is little evidence here, however, of parents actively organising most of their children's free time in the manner described by Furedi (2001). Furthermore, while some of these parents speak of their hopes for their children's futures, these seem far less aspirational and structured than would be expected of adults whose parenting might be described as 'intensive' (Valentine and McKendrick 1997). Taking a poststructural feminist approach affords the possibility of interrogating the impact of parents' attitudes and actions on their children's social lives. It enables an exploration of the ways parents regulate their children's free time and friendships. This approach embraces the possibility of contradictions and highlights the power relationships existent between adults and children. It also provides the tools to deconstruct parents' professed behaviours and beliefs, and how they position themselves as "good parents".

2.5 A question of innocence: sexuality and gender identity

The above flurry of reviews, reports and parenting manuals taking sexualisation, commercialisation and the protection of childhood as their subject matter identify some issues discussed by parents and teachers who participated in this research (e.g. questions of innocence, class and gender); these are explored in Chapters 4 and 5. The question of gender identity was also raised in discussions with the children who participated in this study (see Chapter 6). These subjects have already been at the hub of previous feminist scholarly research, often focusing on the lives of girls and young women in the later years of primary school and high schools (Cowie and Lees 1981; Lees 1996; Renold 2007). For example, Cowie and Lees (Cowie and Lees 1981; Lees 1996) explored the 'Slags or Drags' divide that was later alluded to in Buckingham *et al's* (2010) Report to the Scottish

Parliament. This was a small-scale study of 32 girls attending two Islington comprehensives. Cowie and Lees sought to interrogate the girls' varied and changing understanding of the use of the term 'slag', the impact on girls who had the term applied to them and the way the term was used by boys to construct masculine identity and sexuality. Noting the class as well as gender dynamics at play, they identified that the use of these terms was one of the main ways that girls in these schools were subordinated. Lees concludes:

The policing of women through sexual reputation starts in adolescence, where a girls' sexual reputation is a constant source of debate and gossip between boys and girls, as well as between teachers and social workers. A girl's standing can be destroyed by insinuation about her sexual morality, a boys' reputation in contrast is usually enhanced by his sexual exploits. (Lees 1996: 1)

While little doubt is left in the research that regulation of sexuality is a primary form of restricting girls' entire identity and establishing their status among peers, other work tends to suggest this occurs far earlier than adolescence (Renold 2005, 2007; Walkerdine 1997). Girls' gender identities are so inextricably linked to their sexual identities, in a way that boys' are not, that it is of little importance whether a girl has multiple, one or no sexual partners; what matters is her *reputation*. Abusive terms like 'slag', 'bitch' and 'whore' are bandied about by both boys and girls, but have little relation to actual knowledge of a girls' sexual behaviour. It is the impression a girl makes and what is said about her that determine whether

she enters the category of 'slag' or 'drag', with the only real escape from either being to 'catch' a serious or long-term boyfriend.

In *Daddy's Girl* (1997), Walkerdine builds upon her own life experiences and focuses on working class girls' identities and the ways in which these are partially shaped by popular culture. Despite its production at the end of the Thatcher era, with all its attendant ideological, political and social baggage, Walkerdine's work still speaks to us today. For Walkerdine, eroticised images of little (working-class) temptresses litter television and film, some with 'an attitude' and knowingness. These girls are at some level to be perceived as a threat. They are bad girls ready to be redeemed, or victims who need to be saved. Yet, in popular consciousness girls should be innocent, for childhood (girlhood) sexuality is deemed to be unnatural.

Many authors accept the existence of a pressurised consumer culture with young girls as the targets of advertising campaigns for clothing, make-up and magazines. Online advertising, social media and the use of smartphones with cameras, for example, are recognised as valuable resources that inform girls' understanding of what it means to be a "real" girl and "real" woman (Coy 2009; Egan 2013; Faulkner 2010; Renold and Ringrose 2013). It is only necessary to read the work of Rebekah Willett (2007, 2008), itself rooted in poststructuralism, examining girls' use of online fashion design websites to see that many of the contradictions facing Walkerdine's girls of the 1990s continue to confront the girls of the 21st Century. Willett (2008) argued that girls draw upon a range of discourses (for example, neoliberal, media, school and family) that simultaneously empower and restrict.

She presented a complex picture, where the girls she worked with were not merely passive subjects, but reflective and active in their use of various media representations of women and girls. Simultaneously, the girls interviewed were critical of, whilst deriving a good deal of pleasure from, popular sources of information. In a similar vein to the young people who participated in Buckingham *et al's* (2010) research, they too were also quick to censure parents who failed to tackle their daughters about “inappropriate” behaviour, body treatment and dress.

The apparently clear-cut good girl / bad girl binary is far from straightforward or easy to negotiate and much peer group discourse in schools is about maintaining restricted forms of femininity (and masculinity). Reay's (2001) small-scale study of 14 Year 3 girls attending an inner-London primary school illustrated the complexity of female identities. Setting her work against an over-simplified political and media furore about boys' academic underachievement, Reay was quick to note that although girls are generally heralded as the ‘success story’ of the current education system there is far more at stake than the national curriculum and examinations. She argued that girls' informal learning is both significant and ‘potentially damaging’ (Reay 2001: 153); the traits that contribute to their academic success at school leave them undervalued by their teachers and are not generally well-regarded in the competitive environment of the workplace.

Although the hub of Reay's research was a group of girls, she acknowledged that both femininities and masculinities are only understandable in relation to one another. She was, therefore, careful to explore ‘how a particular group of primary-aged girls is positioned, primarily in relation to dominant discourses of femininity

but also in relation to those of masculinity' (Reay 2001:154). The girls in Reay's study divided themselves into four easily identifiable groups: 'spice girls', 'nice girls', 'girllies' and 'tomboys', with some girls moving between groups. She observed that every one of these identity groups helped bolster the hegemonic form of masculinity and that the girls were persistently undermined and harassed by the boys: especially boys of low status within their peer group.

Focusing on upper primary school children, Renold's (2005) ethnographic study of children's gender and sexual cultures begins to address an important gap in the literature. Others have begun to consider the subject of sexuality when researching primary-aged children, but the depth of Renold's work ensures that it stands apart in this field of study (for example, Connolly 1998; Kehily 2002, 2012; Kehily *et al* 2002; Redman *et al* 2002; Thorne 1993; Skelton 2001). As is the case in this thesis, she assumed that children were both competent to participate in her research and knowledgeable about their own social worlds. Renold drew primarily on feminist poststructuralism and queer theory to interrogate children's worlds from the 'children's standpoint' (Renold 2007: 12). By gathering data from observations and friendship group interviews, Renold put children's experiences and perspectives at the centre of her research. In her unstructured group interviews with children, she provided a space for children to set the agenda, which she explained 'helped destabilise the adult-centrism embedded in many research projects carried out with children, and went some way to promote participation and empowerment during the research process' (Renold 2005: 13). The result is an illuminating account of the ways girls and boys do gender and perform their sexual identities. Exploring themes that will be returned to throughout

this thesis, Renold identified school as a vital site for the construction of children's gendered and sexual identities and demonstrated its regulatory, heterosexist nature. She also highlighted the ways children form and maintain relationships, police sexual and gendered identities and explored gendered and sexual power relationships among KS2 children.

The discourse of childhood innocence and "legitimate" girlhood and their impact on adults' attitudes toward the upbringing of their own children and the teaching of SRE in the primary classroom will be addressed in Chapters 4 and 5. Echoing Renold, in Chapter 6, children's sexual and gendered relations are examined, but in this case the focus is on much younger children. Themes identified above will be revisited in children's discussions of their friendships, girlfriend-boyfriend relationships and their understanding of gendered identities. Children's attachment to stereotypical images of what it means to be a woman / man, girl / boy is evident here, as is their commitment to their (hetero) sexual identities and power relations between and within groups of girls and boys.

2.6 Children at play

I view children's involvement in play and the manner they appropriate the physical space of the playground as vehicles for the active construction of gendered and sexual identities. Play and playground interaction has been the focus of much research into children's social lives (Blatchford *et al* 2003; Browne and Ross 1995; Clark and Paechter 2007; Epstein *et al* 2001; Grugeon 1993; Karsten 2003; Marsh 2000; Martin *et al* 1999; Martin 2011; McGuffey and Rich 1999; Paley 1984; Paechter and Clark 2007a, 2007b; Renold 1997, 2006; Swain 2003; Thorne

1993). In this instance, I have chosen not to observe children at play, but to talk to them about their playtimes (both in and out of school) with the aim of exposing the nature of their interactions and games and interrogating the importance of these in developing children's understanding of gender and sexuality. In doing so, I have decided to put the children's interpretations of their social worlds at the heart of this work.

The nature and purpose of children's play and children's use of the playground have been examined by researchers working within a sociology of childhood framework that regards children as competent social beings. For example, Corsaro's (2003) ethnographic studies in the US and Italy examined children's cultures from the perspective of those young children, attempting to put aside his adult viewpoint. His work exposed the active, often collective nature, of their appropriation of aspects of adults' culture to create something unique to childhood and meaningful in its own right. In addition, he pointed out, children are part of an adult culture to which they contribute.

It is common for researchers to identify the segregated nature of children's play (Blatchford, *et al* 2003; Clark and Paechter 2007; Connolly 1995; Gurgeon 1993; Jordan 1995; Martin 2011; Paechter and Clark 2007a; Paley 1984; Thorne 1993). Girls' games are frequently characterised as calm, as having a physical closeness or intimacy, involving domestic or fairytale role play, songs and clapping games. Boys' play, by way of contrast, is characterised as boisterous, aggressive and violent. Boys engage in fantasy role play, football and shows of physicality in their play, and occupy playground space at the expense of girls. For many writers,

children's engagement in play is part of the process of constructing and expressing their gendered and sexual identities, rather than a natural expression of innate characteristics (Blatchford, *et al* 2003; Clark and Paechter 2007; Connolly 1995; Grugeon 1993; Jordan 1995; Martin 2011; Paechter and Clark 2007a; Paley 1984; Thorne 1993). Within the context of an education system steeped in compulsory heterosexuality, the playground is also the place where those identities are regulated and power relations, quite literally, played out (Epstein *et al* 2001).

Paley's (1984) reflections on a year of teaching in an American kindergarten focused on children's play both in and outside of the classroom. Paley's transcripts of children's interaction with each other and with her provide a window into her classroom through which the reader can draw conclusions about both her practice and children's engagement in gendered activities. However, Paley herself offered little more than a description of events and did not offer much formal analysis of play episodes. Although she noted that when children first come to school they are more willing to play a broad range of games in mixed groups than just a year later, she offered no coherent explanation of this phenomenon. Rather, her reflections seem to have led her to accept the inevitability of gender dualism and by the end of her project she came to the realisation that she felt greater sympathy with boys' modes of play. She concluded: 'Let the boys be robbers, then, or tough guys in space. It is the natural universal, and essential play of little boys' (Paley 1984: 116). What concerned her was the ways girls interacted with one another and with the boys. She also admonished herself for creating a space that is possibly too "in-tune" with the girls.

By way of contrast, Thorne (1993), in her ethnographic work in US schools conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, rejected both an essentialist perspective and the idea of children as being passively socialised as gendered beings. For Thorne, school playgrounds are an area where children segregate themselves more than elsewhere. In classrooms children have only very limited control over who they mix with. In local neighbourhoods, where the choice of playmates is likely to be restricted, they are more likely to engage in mixed-gender play than at school. Thus, it is in the crowded school playground that they undertake the 'borderwork': those interactions that simultaneously cross and maintain gender boundaries and power relations (Thorne 1993: 64-88).

Martin (2011) also employed a feminist poststructuralist approach to refute the idea that children make gendered choices in play because they are essentially different. While gender was central to her work, she also acknowledged the intersection of different dimensions of identity. Having worked for two years in an early years setting in London and undertaken participant observation, Martin advanced a social justice agenda. Using the concept of local 'communities of practice' previously explored by Clark and Paechter (2007), where understandings of femininity and masculinity are jointly constructed, Martin demonstrated the importance of understanding the 'rules' of play. She explained that boys learn, often from older, more experienced children, that they should play superheroes, football and with construction equipment; they should show their physical strength and avoid physical contact with girls (unless to push them aside or torment them). Girls, on the other hand, learn to take their place in the community of femininity by

playing with other girls. Although often competing with one another, they engage in cooperative role play, with domestic or fairytale themes rather than super heroes and battles. They talk about and regulate their own appearance and that of others. They also seek the approval of adults with their 'good girl' stance and draw attention to the boys' violent games and 'silly' behaviour (Martin 2011: 124). Yet, this gives the boys, who exploit their "naturally" aggressive and dominating image, the upper hand in playground power relations. Martin asserted that among the children she observed within a heteronormative environment, attempts at border crossing were frequently policed by other children.

Football has become a particular focus for those examining girls' and boys' occupation of playground space and its importance for boys' construction of masculinity (Clark and Paechter 2007; Epstein *et al* 2001; Paechter and Clark 2007a; Renold 1997; Skelton 1997; Swain 2000, 2004). Drawing on Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, both Renold (1997) and Swain (2000, 2004) argue that being a good footballer is a key component of being a real, heterosexual boy. For Swain (2000, 2004), success in sport, especially football, enables boys to gain status (over subordinate boys and all girls) and to construct their identities around physical skill and athletic bodies. To lack success at football, means that boys will be marked as 'feminine' and susceptible to physical and verbal abuse (Renold 1997).

Similarly, Paechter and Clark (2007a) have argued that physical space and the way children are organised within it, along with the involvement of adults in children's play have an impact upon the way children do gender. Among the Upper

KS2 children they observed at Holly Bank Primary School, where children's games went unmanaged by adults, football had become a key signifier of dominant masculinity. This meant that girls were exempt from playing football and thereby from much of the available space that was overrun by footballing boys. While the boys' physical command of the space was occasionally undercut by 'cool girls' walking into games, generally these girls supported the boys' dominance by judging the motives of any girl who tried to take part not as an interest in the game but in the boys.

By way of contrast, arrangements at Benjamin Laurence Primary School were quite different. The play space was smaller and a teacher had actively encouraged the Year 5 girls to play football and participate in school tournaments. Despite this, the boys continued to exclude girls from their games. They were unable to physically shut them out, so instead they would police the boundary between girls and boys by refusing to pass to them, always placing them in defensive positions, and picking girls last when choosing teams; 'girls' achievements in football were consistently belittled' (Paechter and Clark 2007a: 324). Those girls who were considered skilled were 'said to be able to play 'like a boy'' (Clark and Paechter 2007a: 264). This behaviour meant that when the teacher who supported them left the school, most of the girls ceased to involve themselves in the game.

The consequence of the dominance of football in these playgrounds was that, for girls who were excluded and for boys who either performed poorly at the game or simply did not want to join in, the available physical space was limited. This also meant that the options in terms of activities available to these children were

similarly narrowed. It also meant that for all children, the gendered zoning of playgrounds restricted the possibility of mixed gender play. Finally, it ensured that boys dominated the playground, a dominance that was replicated in other school spaces, like classrooms and corridors.

The themes of fantasy play, football and the occupation of playground space are particularly pertinent here as the playground at BCP was a prime location for children to engage in these forms of play. While the playground space was subject to regulation, it was also a site of relative freedom. It was here that children were at their most free to choose who they played with and how they played. It was, in part, through playground games that the children performed complex, sometimes contradictory and fluid subjectivities. They segregated themselves and were segregated by others into hegemonic, subordinate and marginalised groupings. This was where children engage in transgressions of gender identity and where these were policed by others: these were small, most often fleeting disruptions of the heterosexual matrix. As will be shown in Chapter 6, the playground was a prime site for these children to express and develop their gendered and sexual identities among their peers.

2.7 The sex education debate

If, what and how sex education should be taught at BCP were central questions for the adults who took part in this study (see Chapters 4 and 5). These are contentious subjects within schools and beyond. Although parents largely agreed with the need for SRE, they expressed reticence about certain aspects that were rooted within the discourse of childhood innocence, while teachers frequently

talked about children's levels of maturity. Both groups of adults talked about the need to use education as a tool for social change, particularly to tackle homophobia and to give children an understanding of the relationships they encountered in their daily lives. At the same time, however, their thinking was firmly located within a hegemonic discourse of heterosexuality.

Feminist scholars have for some time been highly critical of the provision of sex education and sex and relationships education for young people. Their discontent has often been related to the perspectives outlined above and led to calls for a change of approach. Over time, a strong argument for contextualizing the sex education of children and young people has developed (Aldred and David 2007; Halstead and Reiss 2003; Halstead and Waite 2001; Lees 1994; Measor 2004; Measor, Tiffin and Miller 2000; Trudell 1993). For those formulating and delivering SRE, they contend, there is an imperative to gain an understanding of the 'changing social worlds girls and boys inhabit,' how they make sense of it, their values and the different ways that they communicate with one another (Lees 1994: 281). Measor, Tiffin and Miller have gone further in their explicit statement that 'appropriate sex education requires a grasp of theory relating both to adolescent sexuality and to its connections with gender and theory' (2000: 2).

Basing her assertions on the outcomes of interviews with students in London comprehensive schools, Lees (1994) noted the marked difference in the ways girls and boys talk about sex and relationships, and in the content of that talk. Gender roles, body images and in-grained attitudes towards sex and their importance to

the education process were explored here and, Lees argued, should be taken account of when considering content and pedagogy for sex education.

Reflecting wider concerns within education, fears that boys have not responded well to existing sex education programmes have led Hilton (2001, 2003, 2007) to examine the type and style of SRE from which they would gain most benefit. To this end, she has explored issues related to boys and sex education, far from dissimilar to those debated around boys' education in general, and centred some of her research on the characteristics of those delivering SRE, and asked boys what they expected of their teachers. Gathering her data from boys older than 16, she embarked on a series of questionnaires and focus group interviews to create a profile of the most effective and acceptable SRE teacher. Hilton examined the supposed preferred learning styles of boys, their attitude to SRE (that it is something for girls), and the subject's low priority in terms of finance, training and timetabling. In this she has, in many ways, mirrored the work of those who address the issue of boys' education in general (for example, Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2001; Martino 1999; Mills 2001).

While Hilton's (2001, 2003, 2007) results were far from conclusive, a general view did emerge that highly trained, approachable teachers who students could trust to maintain confidentiality were essential if boys were to take seriously and reap the benefits of SRE. She has not considered, however, if girls might want something different from their teachers. Issues of whether outsiders should be employed to teach boys and whether mixed or single sex classes would be favourable were areas where agreement was lacking. Within Hilton's work, boys (and by

implication girls too) tend to be presented as a broadly homogeneous group, which other researchers have repeatedly demonstrated not to be the case (for example, Francis, Skelton and Read 2010; Mac an Ghail 1994; Renold 2006; Willis 1977). Her research was also firmly rooted in the notion that boys and girls need something different from sex education.

Measor *et al* (2000) take the reader beyond the straightforward view that girls and boys react differently to sex education and the implications of that, to a more in-depth examination of gender cultures and their implications. Indeed, the issue of gender is returned to repeatedly in feminist works, with explorations of how the content and mode of sex education privileges a dominant heterosexual male discourse and excludes discussion of pleasure, desire and intimacy (Alldred and David 2007; Fine 1988; Hirst 2013; Jackson and Weatherall 2010; Sundaram and Saunston 2016). This exclusionary approach to teaching, they argue, reinforces ideas of a male sexual imperative and female passivity, denies girls and women and LGBT+ young people a right to pleasure and delegitimises alternatives to penetrative sex.

Halstead and Waite (2001) conducted one of the few studies into sex education and children's sexual attitudes in primary schools and advance a view on the shape it should take. Emphasising the importance of engaging with pupils' prior knowledge, experience and attitudes, they advocated a values-based approach to SRE, but did so with a note of caution. Having interviewed pupils in mixed- and single-sex groupings they were surprised to find, like Lees (1994), very real differences in the attitudes and values toward sex education of nine- and ten-year

old boys and girls and considered the possible implications for sex education. Girls relied heavily on their families for information about sex, placed sex and relationships together under one banner and exhibited genuine thoughtfulness about their futures, expressing values that were reflected in government policy regarding SRE at the time. Boys, however, while talking a lot about the “facts” (often erroneously) of sexual relationships approached the subject in a jokey, macho manner and tended to link sex and violence. All these factors, Halstead and Waite (2001) pointed out, need to be considered by policy-makers and practitioners when thinking about the content and delivery of SRE, and perhaps add weight to Hilton’s view that boys need something different than girls.

Approaching the issue of sex education for young children, or lack thereof, Granger (2007) reflected on the very deliberate absence of sexual imagery in a kindergarten classroom. For example, classrooms might have images of the body on their walls with hands, feet, head, etc. labelled, but with the genitalia missing. Although writing from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, Granger’s work echoed themes put forward by Walkerdine (1997) in relation to young girls’ identities. In doing so, she also explored adult avoidance of sexual conversations and expression around young children and by extension implications for sex education. She also discussed the reinforcement of adult notions of childhood innocence and in education a tendency to see ‘childhood sexual curiosity . . . as something best ignored, or at least controlled’ (Granger, 2007: 2). This absence or avoidance, she claimed, serves not so much to protect children as to protect adults. Furthermore, this approach is doomed to failure since the ‘little sex researchers pursue their investigations despite aims to thwart them’ (Granger 2007:12).

Sex education cannot be divorced from the wider social and political context, as Trudell discussed in her ethnographic study of ninth grade sex education classes in the USA, *Doing Sex Education* (1993). Here, she clearly demonstrated that despite the intentions of policy makers and practitioners, students bring their own agendas, experiences and perceptions to the classroom. They are active in constructing the classroom experiences. Thus, no matter how the subject is taught, it is difficult to guarantee how it is received.

Using data gleaned from a Local Educational Authority funded action research project which aimed to raise the standard and 'status of SRE' in secondary schools, Alldred and David (2007: 16) developed and expanded some of the above themes. In this, they employed feminist poststructuralist approaches to explore the opinions of professional constituencies and young people about SRE and propose a way forward for feminist SRE. Despite locating their study within secondary education, many of their observations and conclusions apply equally to the primary setting. They identified the tendency to regard young people as nonsexual as problematic when adults think about sex education. This must be even more so the case when we consider SRE for young children.

What clearly emerges from much of this literature is the almost exclusively heterosexual nature of teenage discourse, the SRE young people receive and the informal sexual arena they occupy (Alldred and Davis 2007; Formby 2011; Haggis and Mulholland 2014; Jackson and Weatherall 2010). Homosexuality is all but invisible (at least if we exclude homophobia and homophobic bullying from the

discussion). As Alldred and David (2007) highlighted, SRE is developed and delivered within a heteronormative social framework. This means that LGBT+ identities are located as Other and that hegemonic masculinity dominates non-hegemonic masculinities and femininities. It is also a 'specific site for the construction of young people's gendered and sexual identities (Alldred and Davis 2007: 6). This led them to present suggestions for how SRE might be reshaped in a feminist form.

As this study will show, particularly through the discussions with children discussed in Chapter 6, some of the principles of the approach to SRE proposed by Alldred and David (2007) would serve primary children as well as teenagers. The need to recognise young people's lived experiences and their legitimate emotions, to explore sexuality and to develop the ability to think critically about gendered relations and all types of relationships all apply equally to SRE for children and young people of all ages. It is also necessary for the focus of the curriculum to be developed in conjunction with pupils to meet their needs and to avoid the proliferation of misinformation on the playground (see also Allen 2005), and important to raise the standing of SRE within schools in the face of a competitive achievement-driven agenda.

When discussing with parents and teachers their feelings and thoughts about the way forward for sex education at BCP many of the themes identified above were central to the discussion, or notable by their absence. The above work has informed some of my own thinking about what teachers and parents should consider when proposing the way forward with sex education for young children.

This, alongside my own conversations with the children who participated in this study, has reinforced my conviction that children should receive an SRE experience for and as part of their lived experience as children, not merely for their presumed future as sexually active individuals.

2.8 Conclusion

The theoretical approaches outlined in section 2.2 have frequently been employed by feminist scholars seeking to illuminate sexual and gendered identities and power relationships in schools. Consequently, a number of important, recurring themes have arisen from the literature that will be further explored in the following empirical chapters. The tenacious ubiquity of the heterosexual matrix, and the uneven power relationships between adults and children, boys and girls, masculine and feminine, and the idea of presumed heterosexuality will be discussed. Hegemonic masculinity, and the position of hegemonic femininity as proposed by Paechter (2018) will also be explored in Chapter 6. The power of the discourses of childhood innocence and of the good parent will also be examined and the impact of these on the provision of SRE will be returned to.

There are, however, significant gaps in the feminist literature and studies located within the sociology of childhood, particularly in terms of the examination of young children's sexual identities and relations. There is a real need to explore young children's construction of their identities and their conceptions of their social worlds. If SRE is to be effective then it must be built on children's prior knowledge and understanding. It must also, I propose, address imbalances in social relations rather than serve to perpetuate these. Furthermore, although SRE is a contentious

arena for debate, related scholarly work reflecting on primary school education is relatively scant. The impact of adult perceptions, those of teachers and parents, of children's social and educational needs affect the type of SRE young people experience and, as such, this merits further exploration. Working within a feminist poststructuralist framework, and reflecting upon concepts of hegemonic masculinity, performativity and the heterosexual matrix, these are themes that I take up and develop in this thesis.

Chapter 3: Research Design

Most children worked hard to locate themselves firmly as either girl or boy. For some, however, there was a clear sense of ambiguity and uncertainty:

Alex (age 7) wrote in his science book:

“I want to know if I’m a boy or a girl.”

3.1 Introduction

Giving voice to children and adults, enabling these participants to share their experiences and opinions, and accepting and making evident their differing perspectives with the aim of bringing about a localised change in practice to the benefit of a marginalised group (the children) form the basis of this research project. This chapter offers a rationale for the research methods used in this study demonstrating how a feminist poststructuralist perspective underpinned the research questions, methods of gathering, analysing and presenting data, and the ethical considerations for this thesis.

The stories, opinions and insights that are explored throughout this thesis are representative of a particular time and place. The children who took part in this study would soon move on to KS2 classes, and in some cases other schools. Likewise, parents effectively left KS1 along with their children (although some families had younger children who would later feel the impact of the work undertaken here). The teachers were more firmly rooted in the school, but some would take up different roles or assume positions in other schools. Even within the

year groups studied, the perspectives gathered from parents and children were confined to those who agreed to take part. Nevertheless, exploring in significant detail the complexities of the ways in which the experiences and identities of children, parents and teachers interacted has clear implications for practice in this school and elsewhere. Whilst every school is different, the complexity of the issues covered in this study is likely to resonate with the experiences of those involved in the design and delivery of SRE everywhere.

At the heart of this project lie two fundamental and intertwined methodological challenges that could potentially undermine both its validity and ethical integrity. First, the ethical and practical considerations when researching children's lives, and, secondly, my role as a teacher-researcher were fraught with potential pitfalls due to the inherently unbalanced power relationships that characterised the research process. These issues, alongside broader ethical considerations, and methods of data-gathering and analysis will be considered in this chapter.

Section 3.2 briefly explains the significance of a feminist poststructural approach to this research. In order to contextualise this work, section 3.3 provides a description of the setting in which this research was undertaken. In section 3.4, the benefits and challenges of being a teacher-researcher are explored. Within this, for the feminist researcher, the importance of a reflexive approach and an examination of complex power relationships within the research are identified and explored.

Section 3.4 contains a brief synopsis of shifting patterns in research on and with children before moving on to consider, in section 3.6, the ethical issues arising in

this research. Within this there is a particular focus on those aspects of ethical practice that relate to working with children and the issue of consent.

Within poststructural feminist research, the use of focus groups as an appropriate method for data gathering is discussed in section 3.7, identifying some distinct advantages in terms of power relations, the collaborative construction of meaning and opportunities in terms of analysis. This is then followed by three sections, 3.8-3.10, each centred on one pool of participants: teachers, parents and then children. Here the make-up of the groups is outlined and the processes of the focus groups set out.

In section 3.11 the process of data capture and analysis are outlined, including a rationale for the approaches employed. The chapter concludes by reflecting on some of the aims of conducting the research process in this manner. These include the desire to uncover complexity of meaning located within the data, the desire to empower participants by privileging their voices within the presentation of the thesis, and the drive to encourage change within the social setting of BCP both through curriculum development and by giving participants the opportunity to reflect upon and develop their own ways of thinking.

3.2 Feminist poststructuralism

As Gavey (1989, p.462) points out: 'Poststructuralist theory rejects the possibility of absolute truth and objectivity.' Rather, individuals have their own 'truths' and interpretations of their own realities. While an individual's truths may carry authentic meaning for them, it does not follow that this truth is fixed or holds universal meaning. Within a society where men hold the balance of power and the

‘male version of knowledge and truth’ is consequently dominant, this must be deconstructed (Francis 2001, p.68).

The desire to examine the ways in which children’s gender and sexuality are constituted through language, social interactions and institutions is a central concern of this research. The use of a feminist poststructuralist approach within this context is apt, therefore, since it is through an understanding of the discourses of age, gender, sexuality and innocence and an examination of the ways in which these are present and reinforced in individuals’ talk and behaviours that it is possible to illuminate how these identities and associated power relations have been essentialised. It also opens the way for these to be challenged and disrupted (Davies and Banks 1995; Gavey 1989; Francis 2001; Weedon 1987).

3.3 The setting

When I undertook my fieldwork for this project, I had been employed for four years as a KS1 teacher at Brookbank Community Primary School (BCP). This was a larger than average primary school located on the outskirts of a town in the Midlands. Despite the area’s semi-rural, affluent image, the school’s pupil profile was in line with the national average in terms of the proportion of pupil premium children, the standard generally used by the DfE to measure levels of deprivation and trigger additional funding. In fact, the school was located in a relatively impoverished area of the county, with significant levels of under- and unemployment, and it was clear from talking to many parents that they saw themselves as ‘struggling’ financially because they fell just outside of the criteria

to be eligible for additional state benefits, either due to working too many hours or because their salaries were just beyond the threshold for this kind of assistance.

BCP had approximately 500 pupils on roll, but was oversubscribed due to its excellent reputation in the local community, high levels of pupil attainment, and three successive “outstanding” Ofsted reports. On site, there was a nursery and each subsequent year group had two forms. Allied with this there was an independently run before and after school club for the pupils. Despite BCP’s high level of success, it was evident from conversations with longstanding members of staff that there was a growing perception that the school’s intake was becoming more challenging both behaviourally and academically. Partly resulting from an effective policy of early intervention, there were relatively few pupils appearing on the school’s special needs register. This meant that many children who might have been categorised as having special educational needs in other schools were not given an individual education plan (IEP) (replaced in 2014 by more holistic Education, Health and Care Plans), and so the figure for those appearing on the SEN register remained relatively low.

A vast majority of pupils were white-British, although a few (mostly Polish and Chinese) had English as an additional language. Looking beyond official figures, the school’s intake was very mixed in terms of socio-economic class, mostly drawing pupils both from the remains of what was once a sprawling area of social housing and some smaller, newly built housing estates appealing to professionals and skilled workers (mostly employed in local factories and at the nearby hospital), many with young families. Unlike some other studies of aspects of young

children's social lives (e.g. Connolly 1998; Renold 2005), the focus here was not on a school in a semi-rural setting nor an inner-city school with a very challenging intake. The school was not ethnically diverse; almost all the children spoke English (even if it was their second or third language), and there was a mix of social backgrounds.

At the time the project was undertaken, children at BCP received no SRE until Year 5. It was then that the girls received a visit from the school nurse for a lesson on puberty. In Year 6, this was developed further as part of the preparation for secondary school, with girls and boys being educated separately.

3.4 My role as a teacher-researcher in the research

For the feminist researcher involved in interpretative qualitative research, their 'own experiences are an integral part of the research' (Stanley and Wise 1993: 60). The experience of doing the research must be conscious and elucidated, as should those experiences and values that the researcher brings to the process (Leavy 2007a; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Stanley and Wise 1993).

The desire to value and empower participants was at the heart of the research process. However, it needs to be acknowledged that research relationships were not symmetrical (Edwards and Mauthner 2012). Furthermore, the interests of some constituencies / individuals within the project were sometimes in conflict with one another. In part, these issues can be illustrated in terms of my own role. The problems of balancing my role as teacher with that of researcher were both practical and ethical (Bell and Nutt 2012). As a teacher in the school I might well

be viewed as an “insider” with privileged knowledge and status. However, a rigid insider / outsider positioning was a false dichotomy. My role was subject to shifts and overlaps, as were those of participants, in the process of gathering data (Naples 1996). It was necessary to negotiate my position with individuals within groups on an ongoing basis throughout the research process, and ultimately to decide whose voices to give prominence in the analysis and presentation of data (Hertz 1996).

In my capacity as a class teacher I could be viewed as holding the power in this research process, but the situation was far from straightforward. For example, when interviewing a governor (as a member of a parent focus group) I was effectively undertaking research with my employer who could withdraw support from and stop the project at any time. Similarly, my line manager and the school’s deputy headteacher took part in focus group interviews. Again, their backing was vital if the project were to continue. We all occupied multiple, intersecting positions in terms of professional status, class, gender, ethnicity and so on, and these power relations could potentially have had an impact on my ability to proceed with my fieldwork.

I also needed to acknowledge that these boundaries were as blurred for me as they were for the participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011). As Connolly (2008: 174) points out:

[T]he research process is inevitably the product of the relationships forged between the researcher and the research participants and will

therefore ultimately reflect the decisions made and the approaches taken by the researcher as well as the particular responses adopted by the participants to these.

Many researchers regard the success of their ethnographic fieldwork to be contingent upon their acceptance by the group of children they are studying, if not as one of the group at least as an adult who is not the type of authority figure that usually appears in their daily lives (Christensen 2004; Hey 1997; Renold 2005; Rhedding-Jones 1996; Thorne 1993). While it may never be possible to completely break away from the power relations inherent in minority group research, in this case there was the additional consideration of the power-laden positions that comes from being an adult and researcher *and* a teacher. In this capacity, I had already formed relationships with participants before commencing this research, and it is arguable that the trust I had built during my time teaching at the school meant that people were more willing to take part than might otherwise have been the case. These established associations also meant that I needed to re-forge my relationships with participants in the alternative image of a researcher, maintaining and consciously managing multiple positions simultaneously.

Within the focus groups, participants were already familiar with one another and with me. This meant that in their conversations participants tended to draw upon shared, pre-existing knowledge. In particular, children spoke to each other and to me rightly assuming prior knowledge of their lives, using this as a starting point for their talk. In many instances, I already had a considerable amount of information about children's families, their friendships, the difficulties they had with other

children, and of their romantic relationships. I had witnessed their interactions and we had already talked about aspects of their lives that were returned to in focus group discussions.

Given the children's approach to their discussions and to make sense of these, I decided that it was important to draw upon knowledge that I had accumulated over a long period of time and to include some contextual information that was not directly addressed within focus group meetings. To have repeatedly asked for clarification when children were aware that I already knew about the subject of their conversation would make no sense to them and risked stalling the discussion. However, in providing the additional narrative, I was aware of the possibility that providing the reader with too much contextual information might lead to children being identifiable within the text. With this in mind, I have been cautious with the detail of the additional commentary and analysis provided.

I soon realised that for the adult participants I occupied three roles: those of researcher, teacher and "expert", sometimes leading them to ask me questions about the status of SRE in the school, research into gender, policy issues or how I might deal with a variety of scenarios should they arise in my classroom. In each case this presented me with a dilemma. I could not pretend that I did not occupy these three roles but did not want to influence the outcomes of focus groups by expressing opinions or relating my own experiences as an authority figure. However, not to respond to participants' queries would have appeared rude and been potentially damaging to the research process, and I did consider myself to be working *with* not on parents and colleagues in the research process. I decided

to restrict myself to fact rather than opinion-based responses but beyond that I took each instance on its own merits, taking into account the dynamics of the group as well as the question at the time in the hope that this would ensure participants felt that they owned the dialogue.

Likewise, the children clearly still viewed me very much as a particularly interested teacher, most happily responding to my questions and prompts for information and viewpoints. Unlike the adults participating in the research, however, they did not consult me for my opinion or raise questions about my experiences: something they would frequently do in a classroom or playground setting. Indeed, away from the usual classroom dynamics, they did not seem to be troubled by criticising the practice of adults in the school when it came to playground discipline and sanctions. For example, when discussing rough play at break-times some of the boys explained why they would not come to me with the problem when they came back into class:

Mick: *But I wasn't going to tell them off. Because they would say, "I was playing."*

Bobby: *Yeah. Mick stopped me telling them off, 'cause it's not nice telling people off.*

Mick: *'cause we just get in, and, you know when you have to sort the boys out. And we just get called up. And we just miss our playtimes talking about it, so what's the point of going to tell people off?*

Jeremy: *When we're going to get told off as well.*

Bobby: *Yeah. And when people just tell them off they just lie to the teacher and say they haven't done anything.*

Jeremy: *Yeah.*

With each group of participants there came an expectation of my role and prior relationships that needed to be forged anew within this unfamiliar context. Throughout the research process I constantly reflected on my role and on the impact of the research process upon the participants.

3.5 Research with children

The children at the heart of this study were drawn from two Year 1 and two Year 2 classes, each comprising 30 children. The intention was for children to be participants rather than the objects of study, with their understandings of their public and private worlds being illuminated through their discussion. Rather than imposing adult perspectives and interpretations on childhood behaviour and discourse, the focus would be on the children as social actors with their own ways of viewing the world.

Until the mid-1990s most childhood research was rooted in a developmental approach with its foundations in psychology (Hood *et al* 1996; Mayall 2001; Renold 2005). This perspective had a number of consequences for the research undertaken during the period. It led to a methodology that meant research was *on* children, rather than *for* or *with* them. Research also tended to individualise children, rather than presenting them in a social setting as social actors and often

pictured them as 'vulnerable incompetents or deviants, either at the mercy of or posing a risk to adult social worlds' (Hood *et al* 1996: 118).

Christensen and Prout (2002) chart the ways that research on and with children might be categorised and how it has changed over time. They identify four (not necessarily distinct) ways of treating children in research: children as objects; children as subjects; children as social actors and children as 'participants and co-researchers' (Christensen and Prout 2002: 480). Traditionally, children have been regarded as vulnerable, in need of protection, lacking competence, unreliable, and have not been recognised as social actors in their own right. Usually the adults around them, for example teachers, parents, social workers, are canvassed for their perspectives while those of the children remain unacknowledged. However, increasingly the approach has moved to regarding children as subjects and social agents, promoting methodologies giving children and their perspectives an increasingly central position, as separate entities from families or schools. Finally, the idea of children as active participants or co-researchers has begun to gain ground.

This more recent approach, taking children beyond the status of object in childhood research, has gained more traction in sociology in the wake of an increased focus on other marginalised groups, including women and LGBT+ communities. Feminist research methodologies have informed the study of children as active social beings, and explorations of children's lives from within the sociology of childhood have served to illuminate social divisions and structures of power (e.g. Corsaro 2011; Mayall 2002; Renold 2005; Thorne 1987, 1993).

However, this is not to say that other approaches are not valid. Indeed, as Hill (1997: 172) notes:

. . . research that directly involves children is not necessarily superior to or more desirable than other kinds of research. The value and appropriateness of any one method depends on the purpose of the research . . .

Nonetheless, if this project were to be of value it would be essential to understand children as social agents, setting their own agendas, developing their own perceptions and acting upon their social world. To take them as mere objects would give only a limited and distorted picture of their experiences and understanding of their relationships with their peers. It would also replicate the disempowered social positioning of children within wider society. Only through talking to children, rather than just to their teachers, parents and other adults that children come into contact with on a daily basis, could anything approaching an understanding of children's gendered and sexualised behaviour and identities be reached. Drawing upon Keddie's (2004) and Renold's (2005) research using friendship groups interviews, it became clear that the use of these approaches to data gathering would provide a space for children to discuss those issues that they considered to be important, to set the agenda and to represent their own experiences in their own way. While, as part of my research, I had questions of my own, it was my desire to value children's experiences and to understand what they wanted to share about their opinions and lives.

3.6 Ethical issues

For this research, I followed British Educational Research Association's (BERA) (2011) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational*, and gained the approval of the University Ethics Committee (Appendix 2). However, broadly rooted in a feminist 'ethics of care' research model, the ethical concerns for this research design went beyond the standard institutionalised requirements (Edwards and Mauthner 2012; Naples 1996). My approach was one in which all constituencies were respected as comprising individuals with valuable experience and knowledge, and focus groups were forums in which to share these.

Initially, I sought permission from the school's headteacher and governors and all participants in the research process gave consent (see Appendices 3-10). Participants were assured that they would remain anonymous and that the data generated would be stored securely. However, in the case of the children I needed to clearly explain that if they told me something that I thought meant they were unsafe in any way I would need to tell the school's family liaison worker. At the end of the focus group sessions all participants were invited to choose pseudonyms for themselves; all the children did this and around half of the teachers. I assigned the remainder their pseudonyms. Throughout this thesis I have referred to the young participants as "children" rather than "pupils". The reason for this is that I seek to identify them as holistic beings with a life within and outside of school in which they are positioned and position themselves as more than just learners within a single, power-laden institution.

As in this instance, research on / with children often takes place in schools. This context presents the researcher with particular ethical issues on a number of levels, but most particularly related to consent and power (David, Edwards and Alldred 2001; Edwards and Alldred 1999; Hill, Laybourn and Borland 1996; Hood Kelley and Mayall 1996; Morrow and Richards 1996; Phelan and Kinsella 2013). Writing in 1994, Lansdowne (cited in Morrow and Richards 1996: 97) asserts that children are both 'inherently vulnerable because of their physical weakness, and lack of knowledge and experience' and 'structurally vulnerable' due to their lack of economic and political resources and rights. Within this context, she claims that children's voices and experiences are neglected within society and social research. While over time children have increasingly become a focus of social research and of the process as participants, Lansdowne's assertions still contain some truth. This is especially the case when we consider the question of structural vulnerability and research situated in schools, where children's power is traditionally limited.

To undermine the view of children as Other, Oakley (1994) asserts the need for them to be treated similarly to adults, although this logically leads to the viewpoint that ethically the same considerations should be extended to both children and adults. Moreover, it is incumbent on the researcher to recognise children as members of different ethnic, gendered and class groupings and to represent what they say and do accurately. Similarly, Christensen and Prout discuss ethical issues relating to treating children as social actors and participants in research and advocate working with "ethical symmetry' between children and adults' (2002: 478). In other words, the fundamental ethical principles within research are the

same whether it is conducted with adults or children. This also means that any differences between carrying out research with children or with adults should be allowed to arise from this starting point, according to the concrete situation of children, rather than being assumed in advance (Christian and Prout 2002: 482).

Conducting research in school might lead a researcher to judge competence on the basis of age or year group, as this is how schools are organised, and to decide that those children in the first years of their schooling are automatically less competent to take part in research than those in older year groups (David, Edwards and Aldred 2001). Christensen and Prout (2002) take up Bauman's (1993) argument that although children should not necessarily be viewed as 'vulnerable' or 'incompetent', 'taking responsibility means entering a dialogue that recognizes commonality but also honours difference' (Christensen and Prout 2002: 479-80). As such, it is unwise and unfair to make sweeping assumptions about the efficacy and suitability of children participating in research; as with any other social group it is important to be aware that not all children are 'equally suited' to participate (Christensen and Prout, 2002: 483). As a classroom practitioner, I was well-aware that year grouping did not equate to competence, and an inclusive approach to teaching requires a deep commitment to viewing children as individuals within a group context.

As noted above, the importance of the power relationship between researcher and researched, especially where the researched are children, is crucial and, in many instances, researchers have gone to great lengths to try to deal with this (Christensen 2004; Renold 2005). However, in this case there is a double power

relationship at work. Since these children were pupils at the school where I worked as a teacher - indeed, some were members of my class - there was an inherent power relationship existent prior to and outside of the research that needed to be acknowledged within the study itself. The relationship between parent and teacher is also an uneven one, with parents being invited into the teacher's space and the teacher potentially being viewed as 'the expert'.

In this instance, I believe my role as teacher, and therefore a familiar figure, was useful in gathering both child and adult participants for the study and allowing them to speak more freely in my presence than might otherwise have been the case. For parents and teachers, the opportunity to find out about SRE for this age group and being able to have an impact on the development of school policy were important drivers to participation. For teachers, there was also the desire to assist a colleague in a school with an established ethos of professional development. Parents who gave their consent for children to take part often did so because they knew from experience that I would be mindful of their concerns and the safety of their children, and again wanted to "help out".

As part of the recruitment process, all class teachers were initially given an outline of the study, its purposes, the format the research would take and assurances of anonymity (Appendix 6). Following assurances that they could withdraw from the study at any time, those who were willing to take part signed a consent form, retaining one copy for themselves (Appendix 7).

Parents were initially contacted via a letter asking for anyone interested in the project to return a slip to the school reception, which was then passed on to me (Appendix 4). Those who responded then received two information sheets and consent forms, one pertinent to their own participation and one related to children's participation in the project (Appendices 5, 7-9). As above, these outlined the purpose and format of the research and assured anonymity and the right to withdraw from the project at any time.

In some research projects children take part because 'gatekeepers' (parents and carers, teachers, headteachers, etc.) agree they should do so rather than truly giving their own consent. However, in this instance it seems that if anything the reverse was true. As Hill, Laybourn and Borland (1996) also experienced, having heard that their friends were going to help with the research a number of children from the Year 2 classes asked if they could join the focus groups. I had to explain to them that without their parents' consent that would be impossible. Some then asked me to speak to their parents to seek that consent, resulting in two more children taking part. Unfortunately, four parents continued to withhold their permission, much to the children's disappointment. There is something of a conundrum here. My attempt to empower children by engaging them in discussion about their lives and understanding of the world was inhibited by parents withholding permission. This situation also replicates a problem that is particularly salient in the case of SRE where parents have the rights to withdraw children from classes; in both cases parents' rights override the desires and needs of children. Thus, the research process itself has thrown light on the powerlessness experienced by children.

Sixteen children had the consent of their parents to participate (some of whose parents were too busy to take part themselves, while two parents who took part preferred that their children did not do so). Having gained parental consent, I gathered the children together in my classroom. Rather than assuming the traditional position of the teacher by standing at the front, the children and I sat together on the carpet while I informed them about the research. While this might be seen as a physical subversion of the teacher-pupil relationship, unlike in secondary schools, sitting this way with children is far from uncommon in primary school classrooms and something I would frequently do during lessons. I explained that taking part in the research would help me to work out what they should be learning about in future PSHE lessons and to find out more about their opinions and the things they did. I was also clear that they would be helping me to write a “big report” that might mean I would be able to pass an important test at a university (I also explained what this is).

Despite my best efforts, David, Edwards and Alldred’s (2001) work rightly casts doubt on the neutrality of my role and of the setting in the recruitment of children to the study. The classroom setting carries connotations and expectations about the positions to be assumed by individuals and the associated power relations. In my explanation of the research process and purpose I reverted to the role of teacher and the children to the role of pupil. Pupils were given the opportunity to talk to one another and to ask me questions: common approaches to pedagogy. As in David, Edwards and Alldred’s research into home-school relations: ‘The boundaries between education and information became blurred and not readily

susceptible to detailed delineation' (2001: 359). Furthermore, the focus group sessions themselves could conceivably be viewed as a pedagogic exercise.

Children were asked if they would like to take part in the research, rather than being expected to opt out, and were assured that they could leave the project at any time with no repercussions (David, Edwards and Alldred 2001; Phelan and Kinsella 2013). I took this approach because I considered it easier for children to say they did want to take part than to say they wanted to be excluded as this would require them to actively dissent from the process in a setting and relationship where this would run counter to the established social norms. They were then all given their own assent forms in appropriate language, which we all read and talked about together (Appendix 9). Lastly, I asked them to sign to give their assent, an event that was met with great enthusiasm by all the children. Unlike the children discussed by Phelan and Kinsella (2013) in their consideration of some of the practical and ethical issues of carrying out research with children, these children were easily able to write their names and did so regularly in class. The actual act of writing their name was not an opportunity to show their proficiency but more of an everyday occurrence and as such should not be seen as an incentive to agree to take part. Even with this last act, there was a replication of classroom practice as it was a requirement in the school for children to be given academic targets which they would sign as an indication that they had been discussed and understood. Furthermore, to a considerable degree, the classroom location of the discussion and the fact of my position as a teacher also reflected the children's daily experiences of education.

Rather than assuming that giving assent at the beginning of the process implied an ongoing commitment to involvement, before each focus group session I collected children from their classrooms, asking if they would like to join me. This was particularly important before the second session as by then children were fully aware of what participation meant. I also explained to the children that they could leave the focus group session at any time and was mindful of any point at which they might appear uncomfortable with the discussion.

All the children with parental permission agreed to take part in the study and having participated in the first focus group session returned to participate in the second. Additionally, as noted above, some children without consent also sought to be included in this study. Edwards and Alldred's (1999) analysis of how children and young people viewed their research on home-school partnerships might provide some insight into why this was the case. Children's perspectives were categorised under a number of themes. For instance, they saw research 'as educational', 'as fun', 'as therapeutic' and 'as empowering' (Edwards and Alldred 1999: 274). It was the case that the focus groups took part during school time. As such the children certainly might have seen these as an opportunity to get away from their usual classroom activities, as fun rather than as education, and there was no loss of opportunity to be playing with their friends (Denscombe and Aubrook 1992). This was also an occasion that children might well have regarded as empowering: their voices would be heard and what they said was going to have an impact on what they would be taught.

The fact that parents had given consent might also have been important in that children could have felt that they needed to comply with what they perceived as their parents' wishes. It might also have been the case that the school context and my role as a teacher were inherently coercive as within this location children are expected to follow the rules and do as their teachers tell them (Denscombe and Aubrook 1992). Finally, in my experience, children are often eager to please. My relationship with these children might have meant they were willing to take part because they wanted to help me. I did not seek the answer to these questions as part of the research process, and it is unlikely that had I done so I would have received a single, unifying response. These are, however, complex issues that are worth reflecting upon.

Ideally the children's focus groups would have been my first undertaking, providing me with some of the context for adult discussions and avoiding the possibility of adult 'coaching' of children in advance. However, the need to reassure parents, to gain their involvement in the project and to get permission for children to take part, meant that I needed to begin with the adults. In the end, the order in which I undertook the focus groups appeared to have no significant impact, with none of the children indicating in any way that they had already spoken to their parents about what they might say.

The use of focus groups was at least in part motivated by ethical considerations. Madriz (2003) argues that for a feminist researcher, focus groups may prove to be a more ethically appropriate choice of data production technique than, for example, one-to-one interviews or questionnaires, since this approach gives a

voice to those “othered” in society. In Madriz’s case this particularly applies to Latina women who found strength by being interviewed in a relatively homogeneous group that facilitated open communication with little necessity for researcher intervention. She also notes that in these situations, researchers may gain from drawing upon personal relationships to gather participants, as this gives potential members of the group the confidence to volunteer and to contribute freely, reducing the power imbalance between researcher and researched.

Researchers have also demonstrated that children sometimes feel uncomfortable being interviewed individually and frequently prefer having the company of a friend or friends (David, Alldred and Edwards 2001; Mauthner 1997). The use of group interviews also means that the participants’ perspectives and agendas are ‘foregrounded’ while the researcher’s position sits on the fringes (Keddie 2004). Focus groups may also be particularly appropriate when dealing with sensitive subjects since they provide an arena where participants can support one another (Barbour 2007).

3.7 Focus group methodology

Focus groups usually comprise somewhere between four and twelve individuals gathered together to take part in guided discussion and activities centred upon a particular research question or topic (see Appendix 11 for focus group activities and composition). It is not just what people say in these groups that is important, but the way individuals interact and come to arrive at their utterances. Since the 1920s, focus groups have been used to gather data for market research. More recently they have become employed with growing frequency in social science

research, particularly in the fields of healthcare and education (Barbour 2007; Duggleby 2005; Kitzinger 1994; Leavy 2007b; Powell and Single 1996; Reed and Payton 1997).

There are numerous advantages to the use of focus groups for gathering data over one-to-one interviews and questionnaires:

- they are relatively inexpensive and quick to complete;
- they demonstrate how people's attitudes and opinions develop and change;
- they allow participants to express themselves spontaneously;
- participants can gain a feeling of comfort and confidence from group settings as it enables them to respond to questions only when they want to rather than feeling the pressure of being alone with an interviewer;
- group membership may allow individuals to feel a sense of empowerment.

(Sim 1998)

Using a focus group approach to gathering data meant that I was able to deconstruct the discourse of participants within a poststructuralist framework. The language and discourse employed by participants illuminated social power relations, participants' understanding of the social world, the ways in which they actively constructed their own identities and their shifting, sometimes contradictory positions (Weedon 1987). Furthermore, for the feminist researcher the use of focus groups can be particularly appropriate (Wilkinson 1998; Leavy 2007b). As Leavy notes, this approach to gathering data gives participants the opportunity to

express themselves 'on their own terms' and in their own way (Leavy 2007b: 173). While it is the researcher who initially decides on the focus for the conversation, participants are then able to set the agenda, potentially giving voice to individuals and groups who frequently go unheard, and unearthing knowledge that would otherwise remain hidden. Furthermore, these interactions can help participants to reflect on their own and others' experiences and viewpoints, and to develop new understandings (Leavy 2007b; Reed and Payton 1997). This is not to say that the researcher should act as a passive observer once the discussion begins. The researcher might intervene by 'urging debate to continue beyond the stage it might otherwise have ended, challenging people's taken for granted reality and encouraging them to discuss the inconsistencies both between participants and within their own thinking' (Kitzinger 1994:106). Thereby, the process itself can be rewarding for the researcher but also empowering for research participants.

In the case of children, I felt that parents were more likely to give consent for participation than in other forms of data gathering, children were more likely to feel comfortable with their peers, and the teacher-pupil / researcher-researched relationship would not be starkly obvious. As with the adults in this study, I also hoped that the group setting would facilitate conversation among the children allowing them to express themselves more openly than might be the case, for example, via one-to-one interviews (Hood *et al* 1996).

As with other methods of data gathering, there are pitfalls to which the researcher must be alert. It might be that an individual dominates in a group, while others abstain from participation. Group dynamics may also be an issue, and questions

arise over whether it is better to have a heterogeneous or homogeneous group of participants. Recording interactions and analysis of the data is potentially challenging. Nonetheless, with careful use focus groups can provide insightful data.

3.8 Teacher focus groups

At the time when the initial focus groups were undertaken there were 17 class teachers employed in the school, including myself, three of whom were part-time. All of these were given a request to take part in the focus groups with an outline of the projects aims and what they would need to do if they agreed to participate. All but two teachers agreed to take part, with one part-time nursery teacher failing to respond and another KS1 teacher stating that she would rather not. Four of the 16 teachers who took part were men (including the deputy headteacher and the KS1 Lead) and all were white British. Three of the teachers were also parents of KS1 children.

This undoubtedly represents a very high response rate among the staff at the school, unlikely to be repeatable in a setting where a researcher had not already built positive relationships. Additionally, this school had a strong and active ethos of teacher development, with seven of its staff in the process of studying for further qualifications, so a culture of participation and enquiry had already been well-established. It is also likely that the teachers were more relaxed sharing their experiences and opinions with a researcher who they regarded as part of their group and with whom there was some mutual experience (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). However, as Dwyer and Buckle (2009) point out, one potential difficulty of

this could be that the teachers might assume a level of shared understanding that might lead them to not fully express their views and experiences.

These teachers were at a variety of stages in their careers, ranging from recently qualified to near retirement, and four were part of the senior leadership team. Some had taught SRE in other settings, including secondary school (Mr Marshall), but others had no experience of tackling the subject. For all these teachers, a combination of the personal and the professional informed their thinking about children's prior knowledge and understanding, their life experiences and what they 'needed to know'.

The teachers in these groups assumed multiple positions throughout the focus group interviews. Some were parents of participants in the children's focus groups (Mrs Old, Mrs Brown, Mrs Moore), while Mr Marshall's young daughters attended a church school elsewhere in the local authority. Others had children in their teens or older (Mr Hall, Mrs Harvey, Mrs Garrow, Mrs Blake, Mr Mayall). The remainder had no children (Miss Macintyre, Miss Thomson, Miss Redfearne, Miss Kennedy, Mr Drake). Throughout the discussion teachers' positions shifted away from their professional guise. Sometimes they assumed the identity of parent, reflected on experiences and talked about their feelings toward SRE for their own children. At other times the teachers in this group shared episodes from their family lives as siblings, daughters and sons, and incidents from their own schooling experiences. With 15 teacher-participants the aim was to have three focus groups, each with five members. However, pressure on teacher time meant that it was impossible to schedule the first round of focus groups with even numbers, meaning that while

focus group one had five members; groups two and three consisted of four and six members respectively.

The first round of meetings lasted between 45 and 55 minutes and took place in my classroom. Each session was recorded using digital voice recorders and followed the same general pattern. Beginning with teachers briefly sharing their own experiences, if any, of teaching SRE and their feelings about this, the groups then moved on to considering the nature and content of a KS1 SRE curriculum. Initially, using mind maps to help maintain focus, the groups talked about what they thought should be taught and how it should be covered, with KS1 teachers in particular often relating this back to what they already taught or situations they had encountered with their classes. The groups then moved on to a number of prompt cards with relationship types / events on them (bereavement, same sex relationships, divorce, friendship, family and biology). These were the reference point for a discussion about which they thought were already taught in various areas of the curriculum, should be taught, or should be excluded. Participants were also invited to add to the list if they wished. Finally, they discussed the issue of teaching values and how these would gel with those of the local community.

The second round of focus group sessions were attended by all the first-round participants, although group membership changed due to other calls on teacher time. Each group comprised five teachers who, as a stimulus, evaluated a commercially produced scheme of work and resources frequently used in other schools (Channel 4 2009; Christopher Winter Project 2009).

Some of the participants were more vocal than others but in every group all took an active role in the discussions, expressing their views, anxieties and experiences with others. On those occasions when strong disagreements did occur (for example over the issue of same-sex relationships and homosexuality in Focus Group 2's first session) these were dealt with calmly and respectfully. Generally, the participants were enthusiastic and came with a real curiosity about the topic. Often, they commented about how interesting and enjoyable they had found the experience, both immediately after sessions and in the following days.

3.9 Parent focus groups

The parents involved in the study were drawn from Years 1 and 2 children (aged 5–7) attending the school. With 120 children (some with siblings across or within the four classes) in the cohorts for these year groups I hoped that at least 20 parents would be willing to participate in the study. While, ideally, I would have given parents details of the study and a request to take part from the outset, it was clear from the attitudes of both head and governors that it would be first necessary to send out a letter asking those with an interest in the general area of SRE curriculum development to contact me to obtain details.

Forty-two parents responded to the initial letter, asking for details about the study, their own possible involvement and that of their children. This number dwindled, with 14 parents finally agreeing to take part. Most of these were parents of children in my class, or of children who I had previously taught who had younger siblings in KS1. In practice, this meant that only three parents of Year 1 children agreed to

take part (one the mother of twins). In all but one case these parents also agreed for their children to take part.

Replicating the gender balance of other studies, three fathers and 11 mothers volunteered to take part (e.g. Constantine, Jerman and Huang 2007; Durex *et al* 2010; Dyson and Smith 2012; Feldman and Rosenthal 2000; Turnbull 2012; Walker and Milton 2006). Within this sample, two couples (Mick's parents: Hugh and Stephanie Ling, and Rosetta's parents: Oliver Egan and Siobhan Franklin) were represented and all but two of the parents (Jean Paxton and Robert Heymann) also agreed to allow their children to participate in the project.

Three participants were stay-at-home mothers (Mrs Thomas, Mrs Ling and Mrs Paxton), while the remainder were in paid employment or self-employed in a range of roles, among them teachers, counsellors, computer specialists, gardeners, a hairdresser and a medical representative. As such, the group members did not represent the full spread of employment patterns among parents in the school, many of whom worked in highly skilled manual jobs in local factories, were in low-skilled, low-paid work or were under- or unemployed. They were not, however, atypical of parents at the school. Most were married or cohabited in long-term relationships, the exceptions being Miss Kennedy and Mrs Gage (single mothers). Parents' ages ranged from late 20s to early 40s. Mrs Paxton and Mr Heymann were active members of a strict evangelical church and sometimes referred to their religious beliefs to explain their views. Many of these parents already knew each other from interactions on the playground or as a result of living near one another. Some had children who often played together both in and out of school.

A significant challenge with the parents was arranging times when they could meet in groups. Focus group sessions were arranged to take place both during and after school hours to accommodate their childcare and work schedules as much as possible. It was impossible to maintain the same group make-up in the second round, and three parents (women) failed to attend due to other commitments. Consequently, in the second round the membership of Group 2 dwindled to five, while the other two groups each had three and four members. This also meant that composition of the groups varied from one session to another, depending on parent availability. This had the advantage of disrupting any dynamics that might have been established in the first set of interviews, thereby reducing the possibility that one strong individual could dominate a group and giving more space to more reserved participants to express themselves.

The sessions took place either in my classroom or the staffroom. Each of the first round of three meetings followed a similar pattern to those of the teachers' groups. Following assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, and an explanation of how the sessions would run, I began by asking parents to give their thoughts on the principle of SRE for young children. Through the course of the interviews every group addressed the same core themes, but beyond this each was then free to take its own path. Members of some groups were very vocal, and some asked for more clarity about what KS1 SRE curriculum would cover. Some parents were happy to share their own experiences of growing up or anecdotes from raising their children. Each group was also presented with the same selection of prompt cards as the teachers' groups to stimulate conversation and reflection.

The second round, again of three meetings, took as a central focus materials from the Christopher Winter Project (2009) and the accompanying Channel 4 DVD resource: *All About Us: Living and Growing* (Channel 4 1999). Parents talked through the schemes of work for Years 1 and 2 lesson-by-lesson, viewed the relevant sections of the DVD and gave their views on the appropriateness, relevance and scope of the materials.

Parents frequently dealt with challenging subjects using humour. Throughout the process, individual participants were outwardly respectful of one another's views, gave each other time to express themselves, and often engaged thoughtfully with opinions at odds with their own.

3.10 Children's focus groups

Sixteen children took part in the focus group interviews. From Year 1 there were four boys and one girl, and from Year 2 there were an equal number (7) of girls and boys. John and William in Year 1 were twins, and Christopher (Y1) and Rihanna (Y2) were siblings. In fact, Christopher and Rihanna came from a large family with eight children in all. Five of the children had parents who were teachers, either at BCP or elsewhere, and Mick's father was a governor at the school. Most of the children were drawn from families with parents working in professional or skilled manual occupations, and only two children came from a household where neither parent was employed. All the children were white and had English as their first language. Throughout the course of the two rounds of focus groups the composition and dynamics of family life emerged beyond my initial understanding.

Both Renold (2005) and Keddie (2004) propose the use of friendship or affinity groups to collect focus group data from children. Renold explained that her use of this type of grouping and her approach to interviews meant that 'many children could talk about a range of issues' (Renold 2005: 14). Due to the small number of participants in this research, children were unable to choose their fellow interviewees. However, it had been my observation that the children in these groups would happily work together in class and play together on the playground. I also knew from conversations with these children and their parents that some would also socialise out of school.

The first round of sessions was intended to comprise all-female and all-male groups, with the second round being mixed, with Year 1s and 2s being separated from one another. This measure was planned in the hope that children might feel more at ease talking in groups about some issues in girl only or boy only groups, while the mixed-group dynamic might facilitate different types of discussion. This proved to be impossible with the Year 1s as there were four boys and only one girl who had been given permission to contribute to the study. Round one, therefore, consisted of one group of five Year 2 boys (one was absent on the meeting day), one group of five Year 2 girls, and a mixed group of one Year 1 girl and three Year 1 boys (one was absent from school). In the end, I could perceive no substantive differences in group interactions between mixed- and single-gender groupings, but that is not to say the outcomes would have been the same if these children had been grouped differently.

Each discussion began with children being reminded of the terms of their participation and the need to respect each other by listening, not talking over one another and keeping other people's contributions private. Initially, to put them at ease, all the children were then asked to draw and talk about their families and the people who were important to them (Appendices 12a–12o). As this activity evolved the children included child-minders, deceased relatives and their pets. They went on to talk about family roles, jobs they performed at home, their aspirations and, as a result of a discussion point in the first group consisting of Year 2 girls, the types of parties they enjoyed. With their agreement, these drawings were then photocopied and then returned to the children.

The second round of sessions took place in three mixed groupings, again with Year 1s and 2s segregated, and focused on friendships, play activities, the differences between boys and girls, and what it means to have a girlfriend or boyfriend (a topic prompted in part by much discussion in my Year 2 class). In this round all but one Year 2 girl was present.

The children who participated were excited and clearly enjoyed the experience, asking when they could come and 'help' me again. Although two of the girls were particularly quiet in discussions, reflecting their general demeanour in school, all the children did make contributions. As the children were used to taking turns to speak in class, they often reverted to this kind of behaviour, waiting for their turn as we went around the table and waiting with their hands up to indicate when they wanted to speak, but at other times were so keen to offer their opinions and experiences that they rushed to speak out. In these instances, it was necessary

to go back over what the children had said, unpicking their offerings as a group. Although I sometimes prompted the children to focus on a particular topic, like Renold (2005: 13), I often found that the children often took the discussion in 'unexpected directions'. This was just one of the benefits of the focus group discussion approach, empowering children to set an agenda for what they considered to be important in their lives.

3.10 Conducting the focus group interviews and analysis

Each group was recorded using two digital recorders. I transcribed all but two of the recordings on the same day as the group met, a process that was key in familiarising myself with the data. The remaining two transcriptions were contracted out; these I then checked and corrected using the original recordings. I decided that it was important to include aspects of speech that might be described as disfluency (see Appendix 1 for Transcript Key). These false starts, cut-off sentences and non-lexical utterances were retained, as were pauses and emphases, in an effort to ensure that the transcripts matched the speech as closely as possible and to give an indication of the processes of dialogue and thought that themselves carry meaning. This 'messy' speech can be seen not only as an articulation and justification of participants' viewpoints and experiences, but part of the process of forming their opinions (sometimes collaboratively) (Wilkinson 1998). In essence, I saw these focus group meetings as both a time when individual participants positioned themselves in relation to particular discourses and a time when they engaged in the discursive production of their own subjectivities (Rhedding-Jones 1996).

Some effort was made in the first group meeting to note members' interactions, but it soon became obvious that this was a distraction for both the participants and me. Therefore, after each session I noted overall impressions of the interactions and added any additional remembrances recorded as part of the transcribing process. I also noted any themes that had begun to emerge during the data collection process.

Part of the purpose of the focus group interview is to identify consensus and disagreement among participants. Commentators point out, however, that this is not simple (Kidd and Parshall 2000; Reed and Payton 1997; Sim 1998). While disagreement is easy to pick out from a recording, particularly when it is expressed forcefully, an absence of dissent is not necessarily a sign of consensus within a group. Inevitably, some individuals will feel more confident, may be more articulate, or be more invested in their opinions than others in a group interview situation. Kidd and Parshall (2000) point out that only lack of dissent can be evidenced with certainty; 'the analyst must evaluate whether the apparent agreement resulted from coercion or self-censoring of members with alternative viewpoints' (Kidd and Parshall 2000: 300).

Sim (1998) suggests that one way in which the reliability of the data might be improved is via multiple focus groups. He argues that this will ensure that if one group 'is in some sense aberrant' this will be mitigated by other groups, and a more general consensus (across rather than within groups) might be identifiable (Sim 1998: 348). In this instance, in addition to multiple groupings, the composition of the groups varied from one session to the next. This meant that if a participant

was particularly reluctant or retiring, there would be more than one opportunity to voice their opinions in a different grouping that might be more congenial to the expression and, perhaps, development, of their views. From a feminist perspective the valuing of individuals narratives is also important in that these serve to illustrate existing power relationships.

Taking a thematic approach to the analysis of the data, I read and re-read the transcripts multiple times, identifying extracts related to the research questions, themes and patterns within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Vaismoradi *et al* 2013). Initially these readings were focused on semantic meaning and identifying interesting extracts. With systematic re-reading this analysis developed further to begin to examine the underpinnings of participants' utterances; I began to interrogate the assumptions that led participants to express particular positions within individual interviews and across the data sets.

Coding the data was a multi-layered process. The data was complex and my understanding of the context was important, so rather than using computer software, I chose to code manually (Gallagher 2007 cited in Saldana 2013). Initially I wrote notes on printed copies of the transcripts. I then moved to developing computer files based on themes, copying extracts across from the transcript files to thematically organised documents for each of the three groups of participants. Some extracts appeared under more than one theme, some only once. Some themes had only a small number of extracts attached to them. Elements of the transcripts were discarded completely as irrelevant to the research questions (e.g. one group of parents engaged in an extended

conversation about the use of traditional hand soap versus liquid soap dispensers in the children's toilets). Furthermore, as noted above, I was careful to ensure the extracts showed how conversations were part of the mechanism for arriving at an opinion, part of the meaning making process, rather than showing just the outcomes (Macnaghten and Myers 2004, cited in Silverman 2011).

Once I had identified the initial themes, I revisited the data extracts within them. This allowed me to identify where there was a good deal of overlap and themes might legitimately be combined. Throughout the process, I repeatedly returned to the data set in its entirety to ensure that the identified themes and the extracts within these were realistic representations of focus group interactions.

3.11 Conclusion

For feminists, gender, sexuality and childhood are all political and educational issues. As such, the personal "stories" of the participants in this study serve as a vehicle for exploring and challenging the wider social order (Brooks and Hesse-Biber 2007; David 2016; Mayall 2001). However, the teachers, parents and children of BCP had their own experiences, characteristics and viewpoints that were to some extent unique, and 'constituted by a host of discursive practices' (Leavy 2007a: 95). Through listening to multiple constituencies within the school the aim was to provide sufficient understanding of a small social world (BCP) to bring about a significant localised transformation (Edwards and Mauthner 2012).

Chapter 4: Teachers' views on teaching about sex and relationships

It was a tradition in the school that the birth of a baby within a family was celebrated with a gift for the new mother. Most frequently, this was to mark the birth of a younger sibling for the children in school but sometimes it was a new niece or nephew:

The SENCO, Mrs Stephenson, came into the classroom to see Sherys. She brought a small package with her containing a baby grow, some knitted booties and matching hat. She explained to Sherys that she would like her to take the package home to her fourteen-year old sister, as a gift from the school: she had just had her first baby.

4.1 Introduction

With the aim of researching what teachers at BCP considered to be appropriate SRE for KS1 children, six focus group interviews were undertaken with teachers from across the school. The themes identified here address both physical and social aspects of SRE and contribute to the overall picture of adult participants' views on SRE for young children.

This chapter begins with an examination of teachers' prior experiences and broad attitudes toward SRE, as these form the bedrock of their opinions for what and how the subject should be taught. Throughout, the teachers articulated concerns

about parental attitudes to SRE, teacher confidence and lack of knowledge and training. The consequence of these is that although teachers saw the value of children learning about a range of topics, they were sometimes less than eager to actually teach them. These conversations demonstrated that parents' perceived desires for children's education ultimately overrode children's needs and teachers' professional opinions and experience. In section 4.3 teachers' views about curriculum content in terms of biology and the discourse of pleasure are considered. Here, teachers discussed pitch and pedagogy; they also exhibited a deep-seated reticence to talk about pleasure.

The intersection of gender and class are discussed in section 4.5. These are explored against the backdrop of neoliberal education policies and practices that operate within schools, and teachers' perceptions of their own roles as educators. When considering the subject of the family, section 4.5 reflects upon the heterosexist assumptions of government guidance on the teaching of SRE and argues that this, along with worries about parental reactions, acts to constrain teachers who express a fundamental belief in an inclusive approach to education.

The heterosexist nature of the classroom and the absence of a strong anti-homophobic stance are interrogated in sections 4.6 and 4.7. What becomes evident here is that teachers continued to be wedded to a normative alignment of gender and sexuality that is located in the body. Finally, the ways in which teachers employed the discourse of maturity, rather than innocence, in relation to the teaching of SRE are examined. Again, maturity was linked to gender, with teachers drawing upon stereotypical depictions of girls and boys to justify

pedagogic approaches, thereby reinforcing those stereotypes and gender power relations.

Throughout, teachers' views were not firm and fixed. Individuals often shifted position on topics (sometimes more than once), contradicted themselves and talked through their feelings with no real resolution. Nonetheless, they all saw the value of KS1 SRE to enable children to make sense of the world around them, to feel valued and to value others, and to prepare them for their teenage and adult lives. They also regarded SRE as a vehicle for social change.

4.2 Teachers' prior experiences and attitudes to teaching SRE

For some years at BCP, SRE had only been taught in Years 5 and 6, reflecting a similar picture in many schools across the country (Formby *et al* 2011; Formby 2011). In Year 5 this was confined to showing a DVD followed by a talk with the school nurse and Mrs Blake (one of the Year 5 teachers) about menstruation, which was only delivered to the girls. As part of the transition to secondary school, the curriculum was then expanded in Year 6, with the school nurse and class teachers working together, largely to address issues related to puberty. Girls and boys were taught separately, a female teacher (Mrs Brown) working with the girls and a male teacher (Mr Marshall) with the boys.

Teachers' experiences of SRE and general attitude toward the subject had a considerable impact on what they thought should be taught and the pedagogical approaches that should be employed with KS1 children. The teachers' differing experiences of SRE also had a direct impact on their confidence and willingness

to teach it in the future. Three of the teachers (Mr Hall, Mrs Blake, and Mr Mayall) recalled the impact of Section 28 of the Local Government Act prohibiting LEAs from promoting homosexuality, though none cited this as a cause for any reluctance they felt toward teaching any aspect of SRE (Pilcher 2005; Thomson 1994).

Through discussions, a number of barriers emerged that confirm the findings of studies undertaken elsewhere (Aldred and David 2007; Johnson *et al* 2014; Mason 2010; Milton 2001, 2003). These included lack of subject knowledge, the difficulties of deciding on appropriate pitch, how to respond to children's questions and parental attitudes. The foundation of some teachers' anxiety was that none of the participants had received any significant amount of training related to teaching SRE, either through their initial teacher education or continuing professional development (something that is likely to worsen with the growing number of academies² and a reduction in local authorities' ability to provide advisors and to fund training). Only Miss Thomson, as subject coordinator, had either read any guidance regarding the teaching of SRE or received any recent PSHE training; even so, she was far from at ease with the idea of teaching SRE:

Miss Thomson: *We didn't really do much during any university training but, in researching the sex education scheme for Key Stage 2, now I'm learning more about it. But it's still a daunting prospect for me to apply it to my actual teaching.*

² Independently run schools funded directly from central government there is no requirement for these to follow the *National Curriculum* (DfE 2013).

This picture of training is typical across the teaching profession in the UK and further afield, and reflects the low priority given to PSHE within the curriculum (Alldred, David and Smith 2003; Alldred and David 2007; Formby *et al* 2011; Milton 2001, 2003; Ofsted 2013; SEF 2008; Vavrus 2009; Walker, Green and Tilford 2002). Despite Ofsted's (2013) insistence on the importance of PSHE and the assertion that 'the majority [of schools] choose to teach it' (Ofsted 2013: 9), at the time this research was undertaken its non-statutory status meant that in many schools PSHE, and within that SRE, often assumed the position of an "also ran" subject. This led Ofsted to conclude that PSHE provision was 'inadequate' in 40% of schools and that a third of schools needed to improve their SRE teaching (Ofsted 2013: 4). Under the pressure of an overloaded timetable and in an education system where schools (and, therefore, individual teachers) are judged by the success of pupils in English and Mathematics, rather than on the basis of the successful provision of a broad, rich curriculum that aims to develop the whole child, discrete teaching is often squeezed into short sessions, taught by teaching assistants or sometimes completely abandoned in favour of core subjects (Alldred and David 2007; Formby 2011; PSHE Association 2016).³

Studies by Sacha Mason (2010) and Jan Milton (2003) indicate that teachers are sometimes concerned about parents' potential responses to sex education. During the focus group discussions, it became apparent that parental attitudes to SRE was one factor that made these teachers feel uncomfortable.

³ Under the 1999 *National Curriculum* this meant English, mathematics and science. Under the revised (DfE 2013) curriculum, this was expanded to include computing.

Mr Mayall: *I think your problem's going to be: it's very difficult to judge what the response from parents will be. I mean you're going to have parents who will say, "Yes, that's taken out of our hands, I'm quite happy with that." And then, "This is our family job; this is what we actually want to do in private."*

The right of parents to remove their children from SRE lessons (DfEE 2000) did allay some of the teachers' concerns that the introduction of SRE across all year groups in the school might lead to friction between home and school, but also led to a degree of dismay that all children would not have the benefit of these life lessons.

Mrs Moore: *Would you have parents who'd want them to be excluded from that altogether? There might be some parents who'd say, "I don't want my child to be involved in that."*

Mrs Blake: *And often it's because, sadly, because the parents are very embarrassed and find it very difficult because it's not been introduced early enough (laughs). It's a vicious circle, isn't it?*

Despite this, only one teacher expressed the view that parents should not be able to deny their children access to this aspect of the curriculum.

Mrs Old: *Robert [Marshall] and I would probably sing from the same hymn sheet on this and say actually parents shouldn't have the right to withdraw. That actually children should, if parents aren't going to educate them in this sense, then we*

should be able to do it. Without their permission, possibly. Particularly in certain areas. Not necessarily //

Mr Marshall: *No. I do believe in freedom of choice. I want to educate the community and I realise they might find my views challenge their views at times. I think they're wrong. I would like to ride rough-shod over their views. But I shouldn't, because that's the freedom everyone should have as a parent. I don't know how to reconcile the two.*

Teachers' fear that parents might be unhappy with the introduction of SRE at KS1 were not without precedent. Parent protests at schools following the introduction of SRE have been highlighted in the media (Atwal 2013; Bowater 2011; Goldman 2013). For example, in 2013 at Arnham Wharf Primary School in Newham, parents protested against sex education being 'smuggled into the nation's schools under the guise of the national curriculum' as part of compulsory science (Atwal 2013: n.p.). In 2011, Grenoside Primary School's consultation with parents on the subject provoked not only parent protests but, following a parent contacting the local Sheffield press, the intervention of the British National Party (BNP) (Bowater 2011). This led to a fraught situation with BNP protests outside the school and the headteacher's and governors' homes, the cancellation of a local community Christmas event and the governors and headteacher being accused of 'mental paedophilia' (BBC News Online 2011b; Bowater 2011; BNP 2011).

These are extreme examples of what can happen when sex appears on the curriculum and the teachers in this study did not appear to anticipate these kinds of protests from parents. However, good parent-teacher relations are much valued

in schools, so the possibility of any level of friction was not an inviting prospect. As such, teachers expressed the opinion that the ability to withdraw children from SRE might also remove the problem of dissatisfied parents. By way of contrast, Mr Marshall's support for the right to withdraw, despite his desire to 'educate the community', did not seem to be prompted by fears of a parental backlash. Rather, he was drawing upon the parents' rights discourse that comes through so strongly in the *Bailey Review* (2010) and persists in the most recent RSE guidance (DfE 2018a). Nonetheless, what came through in these discussions was that some children being removed from lessons would give teachers the freedom to plan and teach what they regarded as a quality SRE programme. The absence of a few would be the price to pay for the benefit of most children.

Given the dearth of training and media representations of opposition to the teaching of SRE (Simey and Wellings 2008; PSHE Association 2016), it is unsurprising that some of the teachers at BCP felt that having a very clear and structured scheme of work would boost their confidence and support the development of their subject knowledge. They also thought that this would help them to avoid making mistakes and upsetting parents; they would be able to share the scheme of work with parents and it would be clear to everyone what would be taught. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that provision of these kinds of schemes enhances teacher confidence in their ability to transact lessons in PSHE more broadly. In response to the Macdonald Review (2009), which recommended that PSHE should become a statutory element within the curriculum, Sheffield Hallam University was commissioned to undertake research mapping the provision of PSHE in 932 primary schools and 617 secondary schools (Formby *et al* 2011: 1).

The findings of this research identified the blurring of lines between PSHE and the SEAL programme.⁴ They found that SEAL gave confidence to teachers in what they were teaching in PSHE, but also that teachers were less sure of those aspects of the curriculum that lacked these kinds of resources ‘with SRE being the most likely subject area to cause discomfort or anxiety among teachers’ with some feeling embarrassed by the teaching of SRE (Formby *et al* 2011: 165).

Mrs Harvey: *I’ve never had experience of teaching it and, again, I have seen it being taught. And I think that if I was asked to do it I’d feel, uncomfortable is perhaps a far-fetched word, but I think I’d prefer someone who knew exactly what they were doing, especially with information that you should give to children. Obviously, if there was a scheme of work we were following. Obviously, if it was within what we should be teaching, then we’d look at it and go for it. But I think if I were, I think at this present point I’d be more comfortable with somebody who knew what they were saying to teach them.*

Some teachers were very aware that even with a detailed scheme of work they might encounter the unexpected when dealing with children and were particularly worried by the types of questions with which they might be confronted.

⁴ SEAL Resources (Social Emotional Aspects of Learning) were introduced in schools in 2005 part of the Primary National Strategy. The programme was designed to be integrated into schools’ existing PSHE offerings, rather than to replace them. It addresses a number of themes, e.g. ‘Say no to bullying’ and ‘Going for goals’, while focusing on the development of particular social and emotional aspects of learning, like motivation and empathy (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2005).

Miss Kennedy: *I'd prefer that [a set scheme of work] because I think that it's more likely to have been shared with the parents beforehand. To teach something like this, I'd be very nervous about; if I went in the wrong direction with it and the parents think it's just going to be this. And you're going to get comeback from that. I'd prefer it to be very structured, especially the first time I taught it, so that I could follow //*

Mrs Garrow: *You need to predict in your head how the children are going to respond so that you can be prepared for it. I think that's the unknown territory that's going to cause //*

Mrs Old & Miss Kennedy: Yes

Provision of a SEAL-type scheme of work does present potential pitfalls. Particularly for teachers who lack confidence, there is a potential to become over-reliant on these types of resources, to become overly narrow in the use of teaching approaches and to be unresponsive to the context for teaching and children's individual needs. Walker, Green and Tilford (2003) demonstrate clearly the benefits of training rather than prescribed schemes of work for those teachers who lack experience and expertise. Drawing upon a small-scale study, they examined how SRE training programmes for staff from one high school and one middle school impacted on teaching and confidence. Following the programme, teachers reported that they had become 'less dependent on using resources (like DVDs), and more reliant on their ability to facilitate learning.' They had become more aware of different teaching strategies and were more able to identify and respond to young people's needs (Walker, Green and Tilford 2003: 323). While these changes may be judged to be small and confined to a small study, they do

demonstrate the importance of training to support teachers to develop as competent, confident teachers of SRE.

Experience, like training, was a key factor for these teachers. Unlike those above, for example, Mr Marshall was far less troubled by the prospect of children asking unexpected questions and was clear how he would respond.

Mr Marshall: *I think the worry people have around what a child might ask, I just don't think that's going to happen at Key Stage 1. Key Stage 2 it could perhaps. Because I presume we're hinting at if they ask about the mechanics of how the sex works, with a man and a man, a woman and a woman. That's not going to come up in Key Stage 1. If it does it would probably ring alarm bells that they knew about that aspect of life. If it came up at Key Stage 2 I would be totally comfortable, but I wouldn't discuss it. I would say that would have to be a discussion for yourself at home if you wanted to know more about that.*

Unlike most of his colleagues Mr Marshall was not facing the prospect of stepping into unknown territory. As a Year 6 teacher and having taught SRE in secondary school, he had the most experience of any participant in the team and of encountering “uncomfortable” questions. Mr Marshall was not worried by the prospect of children potentially pushing the boundaries of what had been set down in a scheme of work. However, his decision to refer children to their parents and carers does again demonstrate his commitment to parents' rights. Implicit here too is a safeguarding agenda, with the idea that if children had “too much” knowledge it would indicate a potential child protection issue. While teachers do need to be

aware of the potential for abuse, Mr Marshall could be seen as returning to the discourse of childhood innocence and the image of the nonsexual child.

Mr Marshall's proposed course of action is somewhat more restrained than the approach of the two teachers' who took part in Mason's (2010) study of SRE in Upper KS2. These teachers were aware that pupils sometimes deliberately framed questions to embarrass them. Neither was particularly troubled by this, either deciding to answer challenging questions in a 'biological and factual way' or by 'deflect[ing] the question' or talking 'privately with the pupil' (Mason 2010: 161). Conversely, some of the teachers in Milton's (2001) study of Australian teachers were troubled by some challenging questions and children's motives for asking them (whether the children really needed an answer or were just hoping to 'get a reaction') and would tell children, 'You'll do that in high school' or 'Ask your parents' (Milton 2001: n.p.), an approach more akin to Mr Marshall's.

It was also the case that one group of teachers (Mrs Blake, Miss Macintyre, Mr Hall, Mrs Moore) was keen to be reactive to children's needs and questions, expecting that these would arise 'naturally' (Miss Macintyre) and that teachers should have the latitude to 'be sensitive to how the children were reacting and how they're handling it. It can't be something that's too laid down' (Mrs Blake). In other words, teachers should have the freedom to act as skilled professionals in being trusted to answer children's questions. This viewpoint was clearly at odds with those who had expressed a real desire to have a very clear-cut curriculum that left no room for ambiguity.

The approach of waiting for children to ask the right questions is also problematic. As Miss Macintyre recognised, ‘if they don’t come up naturally then someone misses out.’ This is also rather at odds with usual approaches to teaching. It would be unthinkable, for example, to wait for a child to ask a question about multiplication before deciding to teach about it.

Another solution for the teachers was, as Mrs Harvey stated, for ‘somebody who knew what they were saying to teach them’, perhaps with this then being used as training for the less confident teachers. In 2013, Ofsted reported that 80% of schools used outside speakers to support their SRE offering (Ofsted 2013: 8). As in many schools, the school nurse delivered some aspects of the SRE curriculum at BCP (Halstead and Reiss 2003; Simpson 2014) and for a range of reasons, including avoiding parental upset and embarrassment, these teachers were happy with the idea of an “expert outsider” teaching their class rather than assuming the position themselves.

Mrs Brown: *That’s what I think is easier – going in after somebody has already done the leg-work. We were picking up on what they had said. They [the school nurse] did all the awkward bits and I picked up from there. So, it sort of worked: having that input beforehand.*

Miss Thomson: *I think if I was going to teach it, I would like to see somebody, you know – like you say, the school nurse or, I’d like to have that opportunity to see how it’s done.*

Miss Peake: *I think it's, you know you're saying the right things. Because, I know – how far do you go with something? And what's acceptable for your group and how far do you take it?*

Mrs Brown: *And what parents think as well, because they might not agree with what you're saying about it.*

Mr Mayall: *No. I think I'd be altering my relationship with the children. You know. Not feeling comfortable in that position, I'd rather hand it over to an expert.*

From the perspective of pupils, the use of an outsider might also be preferable. For example, Alldred and David (2007: 88) found that pupils aged 13–14 preferred school nurses and other sex education specialists over teachers to deliver SRE when it came to particular aspects of SRE: '*sex, contraception, pregnancy and birth, and sexual health*'. Some also feared embarrassment when '*discussing sexual and personal matters with teachers they already knew*' and, like Mr Mayall, did not want to '*disrupt*' existing relationships.

In Alldred and David's (2007) study, the fear of fractured relationships and worries about potential embarrassment was reported as applying mostly to older teachers, but this was not really the case at BCP. While Mr Mayall was the oldest member of staff, there was no direct correlation between the age of the staff and levels of comfort. The more consistent link was between feeling at ease and levels of experience in teaching SRE.

While valuing the input of the school nurse, some of the KS2 teachers felt that their own input was integral to the delivery of effective SRE. This may be due to

the close relationships that class teachers develop with primary school pupils, compared to those of secondary pupils who are taught by a number of different teachers throughout the day. Certainly, curriculum content and the types of discussions younger children have with their teachers are likely to be of a different nature, but may still be equally personal, private and sensitive. If asked, unlike older pupils, primary-aged children might feel more at ease with a familiar adult than an outsider, but it might also be the case they too would feel more comfortable being taught by and talking with an unfamiliar specialist. Nonetheless, the Upper KS2 teachers considered their role in SRE to be important.

Mrs Blake: *Well, in Year 5 we have the nurse in once a year, and she does --- . The children watch a DVD and then we do a question and answer session afterwards. And usually, partly that's with the nurse. But then the nurse goes and then we continue it because the children are comfortable talking to us. It's just the girls in Year 5. It does about their development. You know, girls and boys development, but that's about it, isn't it?*

Mr Drake: *Mmm.*

TW: *So how do you feel about using an outsider?*

Mrs Blake: *Well it's good when they know the nurse. You know, when she's regular. That's when, but I think the children are more comfortable discussing is with us. Well, rather me, because I do all the girls. Then in Year 6 they bring the boys in, don't they?*

Mrs Moore: *Yes, we then split into the girls and the boys. And the nurse comes back and she does a session with both of them separately, and again the discussion continues after the nurse is gone. They're comfortable with their class*

teacher. And obviously, it's great because they've got Robert [Marshall] and obviously we've got Judith [Brown] in Year 6 as well. So, they've got a male and a female teacher.

Evidence suggests that this kind of provision works well when it is an integral part of SRE that complements the role of teachers (Aldred and David 2007; Halstead and Reiss 2003). However, the limited nature of the curriculum at BCP meant that in practice the school nurse was a relatively unfamiliar face for the children, and relationships between her and teachers were tenuous, with little discussion taking place about how the curriculum might be developed. In fact, the school nurse's sessions were at the core of the Year 6 SRE curriculum, with teachers' follow-up discussions more of a supplement to the information provided by the nurse, rather than the reverse.

The teachers concluded that the teaching of SRE throughout the school would be a positive addition to the curriculum. For most of the teachers a lack of confidence, caused by dearth of training and experience led to an agreement that a set scheme of work would be helpful. This way the teachers would know exactly what to teach. They were also happy for outsiders to take on some of the teaching of SRE, at least in the short run, so that they could build their own confidence by learning from an "expert". Both these measures, they opined, would serve to help avoid mistakes and the annoyance of parents.

4.3 Biology and the rejection of pleasure

In its 2013 *Not Yet Good Enough* report, Ofsted asserted that primary schools did not do enough to address the physical aspects of SRE and that the failure to teach children the ‘appropriate language’ left children ‘vulnerable to inappropriate sexual behaviours and sexual exploitation’ (Ofsted 2013: 7). Rather vaguely, the DfEE’s 2000 *SRE Guidance* advises teachers that primary school children (no year group or KS is stated) should learn ‘to name parts of the body and describe how their bodies work’ (DfEE 2000: 19). The document then goes on to remind teachers of the then statutory requirements for KS1 science deemed to relate to PSHE:

- b) that animals including humans, move, feed, grow, use their senses and reproduce
- a) to recognise and compare the main external parts of the bodies of humans
- f) that humans and animals can produce offspring and these grow into adults
- 4. a) to recognise similarities and differences between themselves and others and treat others with sensitivity

(DfEE 2000: 20)

In neither the *SRE Guidance* (DfEE 2000) nor the *National Curriculum* (DfEE 1999) were schools given the specifics of what they should teach. This meant that at BCP the science curriculum requirements were interpreted to include head, hands, eyes, feet, etc., but with what Granger (2007: 3) refers to as ‘the great

empty space, almost literally front and centre, where the genitalia ought to be, but are not'. Indeed, Miss Kennedy reported that in a nearby school parents had been sent a letter seeking permission for their children to be taught the scientific terms for genitalia and that this had caused some parents to express their discontent via Facebook. There was no legal requirement to ask for consent and this move might well be interpreted as a lack of confidence on the part of the school and an acknowledgement that they were proposing doing something that might be considered not quite "proper". By acting in this tentative way, it might even have been the case that the school provoked this negative response from parents.

The revised NC (DfE 2013) serves teachers little better in stating that in Year 1 children should be taught to, 'identify, name, draw and label the basic parts of the human body and say which part of the body is associated with each sense' (DfE 2013: 149). In the following non-statutory notes and guidance, teachers are advised that:

Pupils should have plenty of opportunities to learn the names of the main body parts (including head, neck, arms, elbows, legs, knees, face, ears, eyes, hair, mouth, teeth) through games, actions, songs and rhymes (DfE 2013: 141).

However, nowhere in the document does it explicitly state when children should learn the names for and functions of genitalia, nor does it exclude the possibility. Similarly, the 2018 draft RSE document requires that children are taught 'that each person's body belongs to them, and the differences between appropriate and

inappropriate or unsafe physical, and other, contact' but still fails to specify any content with regard to teaching about parts of the body (DfE 2018a: 160). It is only in the non-statutory PSHE Association's *Programme of Study (POS)* (2014) that there is some clarity; at KS1, the document states, children should be taught 'the names for the main parts of the body (including external genitalia) [and] the similarities and differences between boys and girls' (PSHE Association 2014: 7).

With this lack of explicit direction in the statutory documents, it is little wonder that questions around the teaching of the biological aspects of SRE were among those that teachers found most difficult to resolve. During the first set of focus group sessions teachers discussed the prospect of teaching the scientific terms for genitalia and some teachers were very definite that KS1 children should be taught the "correct" names:

Mrs Blake: *So, definitely parts of the body . . . Because with my daughter I was very open, you know. There weren't any sort of barriers; if she asked it was answered honestly. And my instincts are to be like that with children generally.*

Mr Hall: *It's like things like wrist, knee, ankle, they're just things that children don't know. So, from a language point of view it's just a word really, isn't it?*

However, again the prospect of parental objections and rights arose, with Miss Macintyre reflecting on her prior experience:

Miss Macintyre: *We had a huge debate about it at my last school as to whether to teach the technical terms to Year 1s: whether that was appropriate. So that*

went to the parents and they deemed it not appropriate, whereas I would have been the other way 'round and said they should know.

The Christopher Winter Project (2009) SRE scheme of work contained lessons for Years 1 and 2 that focused on the physical differences between males and females. For Year 1, this included looking at photographs of babies and naming the penis and vagina. Teachers reached the conclusion, through discussion with colleagues who had some experience of this, that parents would generally be receptive to the idea that children would learn the names for genitalia and that the Year 1 lesson was largely uncontroversial and unlikely to unleash a wave of protest. In fact, some of the teachers thought parents might feel a sense of relief that someone else would be tackling this subject on their behalf.

Mrs Blake: *No, you see, I'm just speaking because we've just done the Year 5 talk to the girls and I had a few parents in and I went through what we were going to be talking about. And the parents acknowledged that they are completely embarrassed, and they wouldn't want to have to say those things, and have that talk, and mention "penis" and "vagina". But they said, "That's why we're really glad you're doing it." I don't think, in my experience, and I'm sure that there are some that will make a fuss but I think they'll be in the minority. Most of the parents might not use those words themselves but they want their children not to have any inhibitions.*

Mr Drake: *I'm sure this is the thing. Once it's been introduced, and it becomes regular, these inhibitions will actually go away. Because children will be familiar with using them and it won't be an issue.*

* * * * *

Mrs Old: *I would be surprised if there were that many parents who were worried.*

I think they'd actually be quite happy //

Miss Redfearne: *Do you think so?*

Mrs Old: *For you to be teaching their children that.*

Miss Redfearne: *Oh really, because it would take the onus off them. I see.*

Mrs Old: *And I think there would bring a maturity to it and a, you know, normality.*

In an earlier focus group session, however, Mrs Brown, speaking more from her position as a parent, was initially unhappy with the idea that children as young five or six would be taught these terms:

Miss Thomson: *We do labelling body parts. But we do the very simple: head, shoulders, feet. We don't go into any private parts, as you say. But the documents I've been looking at recently suggested that that is part of the scheme.*

Mrs Brown: *I read a book once: Raising Boys⁵. Who's it by? They said, any body parts you should refer to by the correct name. As a parent, I don't agree with that.*

Miss Redfearne: *Why?*

Mrs Brown: *I don't know. I think for a child to be saying ---. I don't know.*

Miss Peake: *It's about innocence, isn't it?*

⁵ Biddulph, S. (2008) *Raising Boys: Why Boys are Different – and How to Help Them Become Happy and Well-balanced Men* (2nd Ed.). Berkeley: Celestial Arts.

This was the only point during any of the focus group interviews that, although they talked about 'readiness' and maturity', teachers explicitly mentioned children's innocence. It is interesting to note that this occurs when Mrs Brown positions herself as a parent rather than a teacher. It is this shift away from a professional stance that seems to lead the two teachers to revert to the discourse of innocence as a reason for not sharing information with children.

As part of the scheme of work for Year 2, children would be expected to watch a short programme entitled 'Differences' from Channel Four's *All About Us: Living and Growing DVD* (Channel 4 2006). The film begins with two children, Jamahl and Vicky, hunting for what they believe to be Jamahl's male cat. When they find the cat, they discover it has given birth to kittens and there ensues a discussion about how we can tell the difference between male and female. In this section of the film the children are shown standing side by side; they then transform into naked cartoon versions of themselves. The film goes on to name and show what it refers to as the 'sex parts' of the body (a term that teachers were not altogether happy with as it might raise further questions), including penis, vagina and clitoris, and there is a short exploration of pleasure and the normalcy of this. Following protests from parents, governors and campaign groups including the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, and criticism from Minister of State for Schools Nick Gibb, this version of the DVD was withdrawn in July 2012 to be replaced with an alternative version omitting the cartoon section of the film (Davies 2013; Mail on Sunday Reporter 2012; Pepper 2013). It was the prospect of Year 2 children viewing the DVD that caused some consternation.

Teachers were unsure and divided over the content of the DVD feeling that some aspects, particularly the discussion of pleasure and identification of the clitoris, should be left until later: possibly until high school. The absence of pleasure and desire in SRE has been the subject of some considerable discussion among feminist scholars (Aldred and David 2007; Allen 2007; Allen and Carmody 2012; Fine 1988; Saunston 2013; Sundaram and Saunston 2016; Spencer, Maxwell and Aggleton 2008). Teachers' reluctance to discuss pleasure positions children and young people as non-sexual beings and has been identified as potentially problematic, particularly for girls and those who identify as LGBT+. This vacuum in the curriculum represents a reduction of sex to the biological function of reproduction, thereby delegitimising sex where this is not the aim. When pleasure is acknowledged, there is a narrowing of this to a specific masculine model of sexual pleasure that relies on penetration, rather than other forms of pleasurable stimulation. Men and boys are painted as active pleasure seekers and girls and women as passive pleasure givers. Thus, a particular form of heterosexual relationship is portrayed as the norm. In this regard, then, SRE is less useful for girls and LGBT+ pupils and positions them as Other in what is meant to be an inclusive educational experience.

The teachers indicated that some of their discomfort arose from assigning adult meanings to the DVD content rather than viewing it as children would. They also recognised that for some children (including their own) the content of the DVD might be reassuring and so, despite their own discomfort, they considered the possibility that covering these issues might be important.

Miss Peake: *You see, I think it's one thing for them to know the names of what they are, but if you're going into "this can feel nice", I think you're taking it into//*

Mrs Old: *I think that's perhaps where//*

Mrs Garrow: *That's more sexualised.*

Miss Peake: *I think you can say, "We're doing body parts: this is the penis, this is the vagina". But when you're//*

Mrs Garrow: *It's all about bodies though, isn't it?*

Mrs Old: *And what worries me is a child who, you know. Obviously, Elliott [oldest son] was worried about the feeling he was having.*

Miss Peake: *Yeah.*

Mrs Old: *He didn't know whether it was right or not.*

As the extracts from this discussion show, the whole subject left one group of teachers in something of a quandary. It also led them to acknowledge the playground as an educational site in its own right.

Miss Macintyre: *I don't know that I've really got a problem with that, but I don't know how comfortable I'd feel, in reality, if delivering it. In theory, I have no issues with it. But again, if they ask I've got no problem telling them. But I'm not sure that all of them would be mature enough at Year 2 to know all of that.*

Mrs Brown: *But maybe they would be. Maybe it's just us underestimating the fact that they might.*

Miss Kennedy: *And holding information back.*

Mrs Brown: *Because, if it's a gradual thing. First step in Year 1: look at naming the part and then go into more detail. Then, maybe we're more hung up on it than they actually would be.*

Mr Hall: *But at the age of six, which is what some of these children are going to be, do we really want to say to a six-year old//*

Mrs Brown: *I wouldn't feel comfortable with my daughter watching that. No.*

Mr Hall: *And it's the knock-on effect as well, of all the other children and how they're going to use that information. So, there's a lot of work going to need to be done on the sensitive nature of it and we don't want them to go around saying, "Does this happen to you?" to each other. And then that comes back then, "Well that doesn't happen to me so am I abnormal?"*

Miss Kennedy: *But it's very hard to say this, well this is normal, so, this thing we're talking about, so don't go and discuss it on the playground.*

Mrs Brown: *Because if it is normal why can't we talk about it?*

Miss Kennedy: *How can we say one thing and the other.*

Mr Hall: *But it may not happen to them.*

Miss Macintyre: *But if they don't get it from parents at all the playground might be their best bet.*

Miss Kennedy: *Exactly.*

As in Milton's (2001) study, Miss Macintyre reflected the position of some of the staff who felt that children should receive this kind of information but were uneasy with being its transmitters. Simultaneously, there was a recognition that this was potentially a problem for the adults involved rather than the children, acknowledging that 'I think it's our issue, not their issue' (Mrs Old).

Having viewed this section of the film, staff wanted to position children as non-sexual but at the same time acknowledged their 'fascination with their bodies' (Mrs Harvey). They talked about incidents of children masturbating in their own classrooms and how they had dealt with these (From my own experience and speaking to teachers at BCP and elsewhere, this is a far from uncommon occurrence, especially in Early Years and KS1 classes.) The teachers had employed a number of tactics with children that included speaking to parents, distracting them, telling them to focus on the assigned task and taking them to one side to explain that what they were doing was not appropriate for the classroom. Consequently, some teachers concluded that although they would prefer not to address this topic with children, they might consider doing so if they had a problem with a particular class.

For some in this group of teachers, although they were surprised by the content of the video, there was less of a problem with *what* children were learning than the *how*. In terms of scientific understanding, the complex nature of some of the images on the DVD (Channel 4 2006) caused some discussion around levels of challenge, progression and presentation of information (see below).

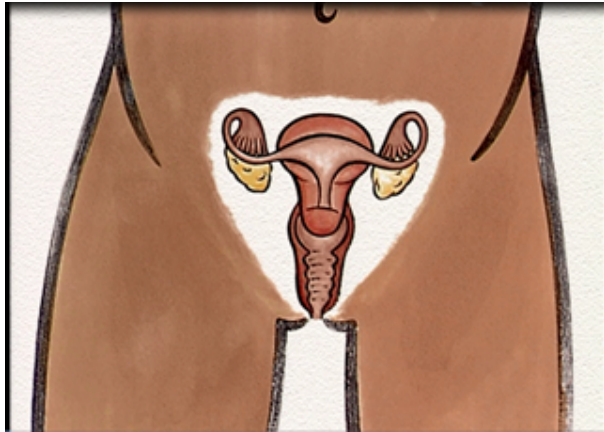


Fig. 1: (Channel 4 2006)

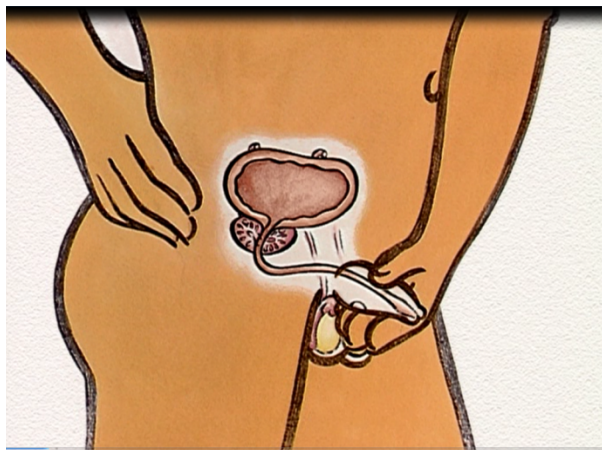


Fig. 2: (Channel 4 2006)

They thought the film was trying ‘to cover too many bases’ (Miss Redfearne) and was too ‘pacey’ (Miss Peake), hypothesizing that the subject would need a lot of scaffolding to make the film useful.

Miss Thomson: *It seems a bit complicated for them to understand.*

Mr Drake: *And a Year 2’s probably more concerned with, and again not having experience, external visual. And we can talk about that as they get older.*

Mrs Blake: *Do they know about things like the brain inside?*

Miss Thomson: All the organs//

Mrs Blake: The rest. It's sort of like, it may be when you start getting into the internal organs it should be part of other internal parts, if you know what I mean. And that puts it in its place. In its context.

* * * * *

Mrs Blake: You see, there's nothing wrong with doing the penis and the vagina and also the clitoris, but then it's the actual, it's the science part. There's nothing wrong with the terms, in my opinion. I just think the science is too hard, and it will confuse, because you've got some really nice learning going on.

Mr Mayall: Personally, I think it would probably confuse Year 4s. I mean, really, it's quite a mega-leap, isn't it? It seems out of sync with the rest //

Mrs Blake: That's what we do in Year 5. (To Mr Drake) You probably don't even know that. But the girls in Year 5, and you'll do it next year with the boys.

Mr Drake: Showing an anatomically detailed internal structure without any reasoning or labelling.

In this instance, the teachers were thinking in terms of educational attainment, progression, pedagogical approaches and accessibility of resources rather than in terms of acceptability and social consequences. They were addressing SRE as they would any other subject, in this case as any other science lesson. This approach to learning continued with the suggested use of anatomically correct animal toys in the scheme of work.

Miss Thomson: I don't see the point of using animals, as opposed to, you've got babies and other things //

Mrs Blake: *No. I think you use them as well so they understand that all animals have differences. You can spot the difference here. I mean you could have quite a good and interesting discussion, you know, about the fact that a cat can feed many kittens because it has so many nipples. You can get lots of interesting discussions: why can't men feed babies, because they have nipples?*

Miss Thomson: *I think that's useful, in that way, relating to the animals, so they see the similarities and with the birth, and with the kittens and things. But I don't understand the toys.*

The question of whether lessons focusing on anatomy and difference were really SRE lessons at all was raised, with some teachers thinking that these anatomical aspects would be better located within the science curriculum.

Mrs Old: *This certainly fits really well into the science curriculum; I don't see why you can't hit a few PSHE objectives at the same time. . .*

Teachers were worried that if they addressed these topics in science lessons it would be difficult to unpack the legal position in terms of the ability of parents to withdraw their children from SRE lessons. Mrs Old realised that 'It doesn't tell you in the *National Curriculum*, that's statutory, which specific detail to go into.' Miss Redfearne then agreed that science was the obvious lesson in which to label all the external body parts, leading Mrs Old to wonder ' . . . at the moment a parent would have the right to say "I do not want my child to have this education taught", but if it's through science they can't do that. Right?' This once more raised the issue of parental reactions and the ability of parents to withdraw children, as, unlike SRE, 'anything you put under that science heading is compulsory' (Miss Redfearne). Teachers were concerned that if they insisted this was part of the

science curriculum and that all children needed to attend those lessons it would result in angry parents, albeit a small minority. Here there is evidence of the confusing position in which the statutory elements of both the NC (DfEE 1999; DfE 2013) and the non-statutory guidance (DfEE 2000) places teachers, a position that remains unresolved with the new RSE Draft Guidance (DfE 2018a). Separating out non-compulsory sex education from compulsory science and relationships education will be challenging due to their intertwined nature, and this may cause schools to be excessively cautious in their approach to curriculum design and delivery for fear of stepping outside of the legal requirement that parents can withdraw their children from sex education.

Frequently, the justification put forward for teaching SRE is related to child protection (Brook, PSHE Association and SEF 2014; House of Commons Education Committee 2015; PSHE Association 2014, 2016). Although this was a topic barely touched upon during the teachers' discussions (possibly because the school already did so much work on safeguarding aside from SRE), Mrs Old did feel the teaching of the biological aspects of SRE might be an opportunity to explore issues of child abuse.

Mrs Old: *The thing for me is then linking it into the conversations of – I mean, so you have the conversation of nobody has a right to, you know, touch you there if you don't want them to. You know//*

However, the focus of the physical aspects of SRE in relation to safeguarding misses the importance of the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills

through PSHE and SRE and of developing an understanding of the characteristics of positive relationships, in contrast to those that are unhealthy.

None of the groups came to a definitive conclusion of exactly what they would want to teach in this area of the curriculum. Overall, they felt no strong objection to teaching any aspects that were shown on the DVD, but at the same time expressed no strong inclination to share all the information shown with their classes (even in KS2) and a definite disinclination to use the DVD in its entirety to cover the topic. In essence, the basic differentiation of female and male bodies through the identification of the vagina and penis was deemed appropriate and KS1 an opportune time to cover this.

4.4 Educating children for future success: teenage pregnancy and class

Education has long been viewed as a route to upward social mobility (HM Government 2011; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2001). However, defining class is far from straightforward. Factors such as the demise of manufacturing in the UK and the obliteration of mining during the 1980s and 1990s, which in some regions led to the advent of a highly visible, unemployed “underclass”, have undermined an individual’s job as a solid point of reference for those interested in referencing class as means of identification (either of themselves or others) (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2001). As such, families in Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody’s (2001) examination of gender and class, *Growing Up Girl*, located themselves within a class based not solely on their position in the labour market or wealth but on a variety of factors, including where they lived, interests, and education.

In the run-up to the 1997 election, the Labour Party promised to boost higher education attendance (ultimately to 50% by 2010) and since that time the widening participation mantra has evolved, reinforcing the viewpoint that higher education attendance, leading to economically productive and skilled individuals, is the ideal (Blair 2001: n.p.; HM Government 2011). Previously seen as a “natural” trajectory for the middle-classes, successive policies and rising student numbers have ensured that it is no longer only the “well-to-do” who are expected to live a middle-class life, with all its material trappings and social expectations. In her examination of the impact of popular culture on the image of working-class girls and women, Walkerdine (1997) argues that middle-class values and lifestyle have come to be seen as “the norm”. Within this framework, the working-class is viewed as a threat to middle-class order. Working-class women often hold aspirations that run counter to those dominant middle-class notions of achievement (Egan 2013; Walkerdine 1997).

Education and a professional career are not what everybody desires. Poorer sections of society and traveller communities, for example, sometimes subscribe to a more traditional form of the family with gender roles that are closer to the idealised lifestyles of the middle classes in the 1950s than the 21st century (Haywood and Yar 2006; Tyler 2008). This, combined with an increasingly consumption-based assessment of what represents class, means that girls are particularly vulnerable to censure (Braggs 2011; Egan 2013; Walkerdine 1997). While these individuals and groups may regard themselves and their material possessions with pride, they are also vulnerable to attack from those who conform more closely to the current middle-class norms.

In her exploration of the 'chav' and the term's associated negative connotations, Tyler (2008) highlights consumer culture as a middle-class means of identifying class. The rise of the chav, an identifiable member of an (undeserving) underclass with a penchant for 'cheap brands of cigarette, cheap jewellery, branded sports tops, gold-hooped earrings, sovereign rings, [and] Burberry baseball caps', represents a particularly damning marker of, almost always white, lower-class origins for those outside this group (Tyler 2008: 21). No matter how the chavs regard themselves, the signifiers of the chav, and within that grouping the teenage girls she describes as the 'chav mum' are widely regarded as 'vulgar'. Simultaneously, the fashion choices of working-class girls more broadly have been identified as sexual. Playboy accessories, exposed thongs, shorts and tops that display a girl's midriff have all attained sexual connotations that are then attached to the wearer as indicators of knowingness, experience and availability, in addition to class. These girls challenge the discourse of girlhood innocence rooted in middle-class expectations. As Bragg (2011: 289) explains, '[c]lass-based connotations in reading potentially sexual products as 'tasteful' or 'slutty' have invidious consequences for working-class girls in particular.'

At BCP there was more than one way to 'do' girl and 'do' boy, but legitimate expressions were entrenched within a framework of normative heterosexuality, with the body as the determiner of gender and sexuality. The relative power associated with these various femininities and masculinities was quite clearly contextually determined. It was apparent that some working-class girls inhabited a familial and social space where a specific model of hyper-femininity was valued

(not the virtuous princess but the sexually alluring reality TV celebrity) (Egan 2013; Paechter 2006b; Renold 2005). Young girls would appear on non-uniform days, at fayres and parties proudly sporting their recently purchased high heels, tiny skirts or shorts, cut-off tops (often referred to by the girls as “slapper tops”) and showing just a hint of a bra-top. They would happily share photographs of their sisters and cousins with their new babies and on the playground parents would display their teenage daughters’ new offspring with pride.

This is a model in which girls acquire symbolic capital from their appearance. Later this might develop further into a career or role as mother (Kehily 2012). Simultaneously, within their school lives, this social capital is institutionally denigrated in favour of a middle-class model of achievement that gives primacy to educational and, ultimately, economic success (Allen and Osgood 2009; McRobbie 2007). In my experience as a primary school teacher, those girls who combined a working-class image with academic commitment were often simultaneously pitied and nurtured by teachers, and found it difficult to fit comfortably into a friendship group among their peers.

For boys, this model of conflict was not so clear cut, for both at home and school “physical” masculinity was both prized and encouraged. At school this physicality was accepted as part of sports. In boys’ wider social world, with their families, friends and on the streets where they played, this might also encompass the idea that boys should “stand up for themselves” and “act like a man”. While teachers sometimes complained of boys’ failure to engage academically, they remained eager to promote boys’ athletic prowess and to rationalise their educational

failings as an unsurprising symbol of their (working-class) boyhood. Regardless of class, at no point did teachers identify boys' displays of sexuality as problematic or detrimental to their prospects. Staff, therefore, acted to reinforce the characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity at BCP: hegemonic boys were sporty, outspoken and were never seen to work "too hard". For their peers, these boys' academic achievements were all but irrelevant. Their domination of others, both in and out of the classroom, was effectively sanctioned by the school.

Echoing the dominant discourse surrounding education, employment and social mobility, teachers in this study voiced the opinion that education can be a pathway out of poverty. Their ideal was that children's life chances would be improved by going to university, getting a good job and fulfilling the "neoliberal dream".

Mr Marshall: *I actually educate people to get to, ideally, to university; to get the best job they possibly can; to have an adult relationship at the correct time; and to have a family when you have the maturity to have a family.*

Implicit here is the idea that starting a family can and should wait. Young parenthood should be avoided for young people to progress. Indeed, it is the case that the success of sex education is frequently judged on the basis of rates of teenage pregnancy (Alldred and David 2007; Mason 2010; Thomson 1994). This concern is reflected in longstanding government policy. For example, in 1999 the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy was launched with the aim of addressing the social problems believed to be associated with young motherhood (Allen *et al* 2007; Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) and Department of Health

(DOH) 2010; Walker 2004). These principles were then enshrined in the 2000 *SRE Guidance* in its statement that: 'the key task for schools is, through appropriate information and effective advice on contraception and on delaying sexual activity, to reduce the incidence of unwanted pregnancies' (DfEE 2000:16). This was a strategy repeatedly reinforced through initiatives such as *Every Child Matters* (HM Treasury 2003), that located young parenthood alongside other social ills:

Our aim is to ensure that every child has the chance to fulfil their potential by reducing levels of educational failure, ill health, substance misuse, teenage pregnancy, abuse and neglect, crime and anti-social behaviour among children and young people.

(HM Treasury, 2003:6)

By 2010, there was a clear statement from the government that it is girls and their babies that are likely to suffer the consequences of teenage pregnancy:

And while for some young women having a child when young can represent a positive turning point in their lives, for many more teenagers bringing up a child is incredibly difficult and often results in poor outcomes for both the teenage parent and the child, in terms of the baby's health, the mother's emotional health and well-being and the likelihood of both the parent and child living in long-term poverty.

(DfSCF & DoH 2010: 7)

As Alldred and David (2007) point out, within the context of a political climate where education has increasingly been employed as a tool to tackle social problems rather than maintaining a single-minded focus on academic success, it is in the discussion around teenage pregnancy that gender comes to the forefront in education policy in a unique way. Although it is certainly realistic to acknowledge that girls are likely to feel the impact of parenthood far more than boys, there are negative consequences to this approach to teenage pregnancy. As an obvious sign that a girl has been sexually active, this leads to her marginalisation within the education system, and leaves her open to abuse, being thought of as a 'slut' and stupid (Alldred and David 2007; Chambers, van Loon and Tincknell 2004; Fine 1988; Lees 1996). Examining secondary schools, Chambers, van Loon and Tincknell (2004) interrogated teachers' attitudes towards the development of pupils' sexual identity and how they frame this within a discourse of morality. They concluded that the way girls are viewed contains inherent contradictions: for teachers it is important that girls are informed in order that they can protect themselves but at the same time there was an association of 'sexual awareness' with 'sexual promiscuity' and pregnancy (Chambers, van Loon and Tincknell 2004: 565). 'Girls who became pregnant were often perceived as social failures and were blamed because they 'let things happen' (Chambers, van Loon and Tinknell 2004: 571).

BCP was located in an area of relatively high rates of teenage pregnancy, especially when compared to the rest of the county in which it was located. Discussing the subjects they felt should be covered in SRE led some of the teachers to broach the subject of how this might be addressed within school.

Mr Marshall: Teenage pregnancy is one that occurs to me, and I guess that would fall in all types of families, perhaps.

Miss Kennedy: In this school.

Mr Marshall: Particularly in this school. This area. You'd have to make sure you got the legal side across. Again, would that be a Key Stage 1 issue? Probably not. But there can be quite a difference between siblings sometimes. So there could be a Key Stage 1 child whose 14-, 15 year-old//

Mrs Old: Or Key Stage 2 child.

Mr Marshall: Yes. A 14-, 15 year-old brother or sister could be pregnant.

Miss Kennedy: If you said the legal aspect of it, if you've got a child whose 14 year-old sister was pregnant, do you teach them that's actually illegal?

Mr Marshall: Don't know.

Miss Kennedy: Because it is, like you said, the fact and that is what you should be teaching them. But is that going to help?

Mrs Old: I think at Key Stage 1 they haven't got enough understanding of how old 14 is.

Mr Marshall: I don't think we should be celebrating it, because I think if you celebrate it you might be on slightly dodgy ground: legally.

Mrs Old: Yes.

Miss Kennedy: We celebrate in class when babies are born//

Mr Marshall: Well, we do. I've seen it before now. We've congratulated 15-year olds in terms of, "What a lovely baby." One, it's illegal. Two, most of the research shows that it's going to have a major impact on your life, often negatively initially.

And I, as an educator, I don't really feel it's appropriate to be pregnant at 15, 16. I mean, that's a personal thing.

Miss Kennedy: *I agree with that.*

One of the teachers had found herself pregnant at a young age and, despite her ultimately successful education and career, would discuss with her class the challenges she encountered in consequence of her early motherhood.

Mrs Brown: *You know, some of them come from really challenging backgrounds, and I'll say. You've got something there now. Now go and make something of yourself. But again, should I be saying that? I say, "You've got those qualifications, you could really do well in your life." I tell them, "I had a child when I was 19 and it was a tough slog." But then me//*

Miss Redfearne: *Do you say?*

Mrs Brown: *I do. I tell my children [her class]: "Having a child at 19, I wouldn't change it, but life's been very, very difficult. And I've had to work hard to get through all of this, because I had a baby to look after. So, if you've got these aspirations, then certain things can come later on."*

Miss Redfearne: *But that's good, because you're pulling on something that . . . Surely no-one can judge you, because you're saying some people have children when they're 19. If I said that, I haven't got children, so some people who have children as teenagers --- you're saying look I've done it.*

Mrs Brown: *I've not done what a lot of, what they expect a 19-year old to do. You know, I've gone and done this.*

Miss Redfearne: *But it's not judgemental. I think if I was talking about it, it could come across as judgemental: having a child at 19. You want to make a better life for yourself, well you have. But some people might see that and say, "Well if you're 19 and have a child, you can't."*

Miss Thomson: *You're obviously not telling them what to do, you're telling them your experiences and they can take advice from that.*

At first glance it may seem that Mrs Brown is working against Wallis and VanEvery's (2000: 415) assertion that: 'The teacher is also expected to be a role model for "moral values", and in this capacity will praise, gently chide or discipline children according to their behaviour'. However, although Mrs Brown was setting herself up as a cautionary tale, she clearly saw and presented herself as a story of success against the odds. What all the teachers here failed to acknowledge was that Mrs Brown's circumstances were quite different from the teenage pregnancies they were most disturbed by: of girls whose family history and social context meant that young motherhood would not be regarded as stepping out of the norm and for whom the prospect of a new baby might well be celebrated, rather than lamented. Unlike these girls, Mrs Brown did not get pregnant until she was 19, with family support went to university, established a successful career, married and had another child. Mrs Brown's story is something of a middle-class morality tale, with a happy ending.

This focus on teenage pregnancy further illustrates the teachers' broader focus on the long-term impact of early education and the need for progression in knowledge and understanding over time. It also highlights the gendered nature of SRE in

schools. Although none of the participants suggested that children in KS1 should be warned of the consequences of early parenthood, they were considering how education at a young age and the way school staff reacted to news of young *motherhood* would lay the foundations for later discussions along these lines.

4.5 What makes a family?: teachers' views on teaching about diversity

The DfEE's *SRE Guidance* (2000: 4) was clear in its emphasis on 'the importance of marriage for family life and bringing up children'. Since this guidance pre-dates the legalisation of both civil partnerships and same-sex marriage, the implication here seems clear: what was referred to was very explicitly *marriage* (as opposed to any other form of partnership) between a man and a woman. The documentation continued to state that children should also be taught 'the significance of marriage and stable relationships as key building blocks of community and society' and emphasised that '[c]are needs to be taken to ensure that there is no stigmatisation of children based on their home circumstances' (DfEE 2000: 4). Despite the reference to 'stable relationships', the guidance came with a clearly stated moral compass that did not align with the family lives of many primary pupils or their teachers.

The 2018 draft guidance (DFE 2018a) states that children should know:

- that others' families, either in school or in the wider world, sometimes look different from their family, but that they should respect those differences and know that other children's families are also characterised by love and care for them.

- that stable, caring relationships, which may be of different types, are at the heart of happy families, and are important for children's security as they grow up.
- that marriage /civil partnership represents a formal and legally recognised commitment of two people to each other which is intended to be lifelong (DfE 2018a: 16).

There is still no requirement for pupils to learn about LGBT+ families when the topic of 'different family types' is addressed (Stonewall 2018). Furthermore, the emphasis on the positive nature of these relationships may not reflect those experienced by children.

During the mind mapping activity gathering ideas about topics that might be covered in SRE at KS1, teachers were adamant that they should be teaching children about different kinds of families: 'all different shapes and sizes' (Mrs Blake). Miss Kennedy pointed out that the subject of families arises on a regular basis throughout the curriculum and in unplanned ways, for example when teaching history or when making Mother's and Father's Day cards. The teachers also continued to draw upon their personal experiences and reflected upon the family make-up of children in their classes to work through their ideas and feelings about curriculum content in this regard.

Miss Thomson: *I know we looked at different families when I was at school. Because I've got five sisters, and two are from my dad in a different relationship,*

and then there's three of us. My friends found that difficult to understand. So that's an opportunity to talk through that.

The absence of one parent through divorce, separation or bereavement was a topic of conversation. Statistics gathered by Child Bereavement UK (a charitable organisation dedicated to supporting schools, families and professionals to help children who have suffered a bereavement) show that 5% of children experience the death of a parent and 92% of someone close to them by the age of 16 (Child Bereavement UK; Drabble 2013: n.p.). The Office of National Statistics (ONS) reported that '[t]here were 94,864 children aged under 16 who were in families where the parents divorced in 2013 . . . 64% were under 11' (ONS 2015: np). While accurate figures for cohabiting parents are more difficult to acquire, Benson (2009, cited in Goodman and Greaves 2010: 2), basing his analysis on the Millennium Cohort Study, found that 27% of couples who 'were cohabiting when their child was born have separated by the time the child is aged 5, compared with 9% of couples that were married when their child was born.' Despite these figures, neither divorce nor bereavement specifically feature in the DfEE's *SRE Guidance* (2000). They do, however, appear as issues to be addressed at KS2 as part of the PSHE Association's *POS (Key Stages 1–4)* (2014). Here these two issues are highlighted within the Core Theme of 'Health and Wellbeing' and teachers are advised that children should be taught 'about change, including transitions (between Key Stages and schools), loss, separation, divorce and bereavement' (PSHE Association 2014: 8). The *POS* also states that teachers need to 'remain flexible as events such as bereavement might require learning to be drawn from Key Stage 2 into Key Stages 1' (PSHE Association 2014: 7). Given the prevalence

of these two life events, it is unsurprising that teachers at BCP had occasion to discuss them with children as they had arisen in their classes:

Mr Hall: *I think I had, not last year the year before, three or four families split up that year. Which I'd not experienced in the past, but it's over 10% of the class.*

Mrs Moore: *Did you deal with that through circle time or anything?*

Mr Hall: *Yes, we talked about lots of different things, because some children see mum certain days and dad certain days. So they're worried. We always go through the point of view that you'll have two places to sleep, two X-boxes, and they're quite liking the idea then. So, it's just trying to make them believe that it's okay.*

You tend to find that other children do it as well. I remember, it's slightly different: bereavement. A little girl lost her dad. It was at the beginning of Year 1. He had a heart attack in August and she started in September. And she found it very difficult for the first couple of months. And then somebody else lost an aunty, and she was amazing. She was talking to them, explaining to them, and saying, "Are you okay?" You see this, but then, so we use them as a resource, possibly, as well.

It was against this background that the participants felt that there would be times when death and bereavement would need to be discussed with a class. Sometimes this would be due to the death of someone close to a pupil, but most frequently the result of the death of a pet. They did not, however, feel that the subject needed to be part of the general SRE or PSHE curriculum at this stage in pupils' lives (although it was not something to be avoided either), as experience told teachers that the subject of death could often make children unduly anxious.

Consistently, teachers advocated a curriculum, both implicit and explicit, that would allow children to explore their own life experiences and to develop a clearer understanding of the world around them. The desire for children to feel valued, no matter what their family circumstances, was a paramount concern as was an acknowledgment that children should be listened to and appreciated as a source of knowledge and support for their classmates. However, reflecting a wider picture, there was still some reticence around the subject of same-sex relationships and families.

In 2014, YouGov, on behalf of the charity Stonewall, surveyed 1,832 secondary and primary school teachers and found that 56% of primary school teachers polled did not address the issue of same-sex relationships when covering the topic of families (Guasp 2014: 1). With these groups of teachers, the question of whether to address same-sex relationships quickly arose. This led to individuals confronting a range of conflicting feelings about the topic as a subject to be taught to young children. Again, teachers drew upon their own experiences to try to develop a coherent viewpoint.

Miss Peake: *Same-sex families as well.*

Mrs Brown: *That's when it becomes awkward though, doesn't it?*

Mrs Harvey: *Isn't that our preconceptions around that? Yes, I mean, I've got a boy in nursery whose mum is living with another woman.*

Mrs Brown: *Well my dad is [living with a man]. But I don't know that I'd want to talk about it at that age.*

Miss Thomson: *Joanna's [Year 1 pupil] just brought photos in [to class] of her bridesmaid's dress and was showing it. And it was a same-sex relationship.*

Miss Peake: *It's difficult because I think that it's something you've got to address because nowadays it's quite, not common, but it's more acceptable, isn't it?*

Mr Mayall: *Would it be worth looking at the reasons for relationships? What's the importance of relationships? Why do we have relationships? I mean, the stability of families – whether it's same-sex, marriage, step families . . .*

Here, implicit in Mr Mayall's statement, there seems to be the underlying assumption that children should be taught that healthy relationships have certain characteristics and these are the common to all types of families. Same-sex families are just one among many types that should be treated equally and without a special focus or fuss. Others seemed to think that addressing the question of same-sex families should be a priority only if they were aware that children in their class came from this type of family. Again, there was an underlying assumption that children will come from a heterosexual family, and alternatives were seen as exceptional. Also, at no point did teachers consider LGBT+ families more broadly. There was, however, recognition among the teachers of the need for children to feel included and valued, no matter what their family circumstances.

Miss Peake: *I wonder if it would differ then, for a class where it arose that you've got a same-sex couple. Perhaps you'd explore that avenue, but perhaps you wouldn't in so much detail if you didn't within your class.*

Miss Redfearne: *You're ostracising that child as well. You wouldn't want to make them feel uncomfortable. Because when I was at school, my best friend – her mum*

left her dad for another woman - and I didn't understand that at all. Even at eleven I couldn't understand that concept. And she didn't want anyone else to know, because she would worry about how her peers would relate to that.

Some of the teachers felt that discussing a range of different kinds of families, including same-sex relationships, would ideally be undertaken at KS1 rather than later. This was partly out of concern for the pupils. Teachers felt that children needed to understand what they would see and hear in the playground and beyond the school gates. They were also keen to validate children's experiences and to put them at ease. Although it should not preclude explicit teaching in discrete lessons, teachers also felt that the topic should be embedded into lessons more generally and questions covered as the need arose.

Mr Hall: *I think it actually could be taught, but then as part of PSHE as well. Like, when we go through certain things, you end up, you discuss the subject with the children. Because, they might say, you know: 'So-and-so came round to see me.' Or, 'My uncle brought his boyfriend round to see me.' And then all the children start. And you say it's okay. You know your mum's got your dad and different people have different partners, friends and different people who live with them. I think today you see so many different things on the television. That they experience so many different things that would we say it's unfair that we're not exposing them to it and teaching them it's okay. It's normal. It's not something you should worry about.*

* * * * *

Mrs Blake: *I think as well, in Key Stage 1 the children are less inhibited and by the time you get, believe it or not, to our end of the school you've got --- . In Year 6, then children know that their parents don't react well to same-sex couples, just for example. And they obviously mimic that behaviour. And I would think, that in Key Stage 1 that that was the time to introduce those comments, very naturally. I wouldn't say I'm going to have a specific lesson. You know, you're having a science lesson and there are elements you can weave through the science lesson.*

* * * * *

Miss Macintyre: *To me it's about treating it as the norm. I know I read a book last year called King and King⁶, and it was really well done. And that was obviously a gay couple. And they found all these princesses for this prince to marry and then he found a prince he wanted to marry and they became king and king. But it was done in such a – it was subtle – even though that was something was to us, isn't it*
//

Mrs Moore: *Did you have a discussion around that or was it purely a story.*

Miss Mcintyre: *It was used for discussions. I deliberately used it as part of SRE, but we did it in story time. So it wasn't a separate lesson.*

While, for a variety of reasons, most of the teachers felt that same-sex relationships should be explored in SRE, for some a lack of confidence, of

⁶ De Haan, L. and Nijland, s. (2002) *King and King*. Berkeley: Tricycle Press.
Here Miss Macintyre is speaking about here experience as a Year 2 teacher in her former school.

personal experience and of general understanding were seen as a barrier to achieving this. For some of the teachers, at least, there was still an underlying attachment to normative heterosexuality that provoked uncertainty and anxiety.

Miss Redfearne: *I think I'd want to have clarification on marriage generally. Maybe you don't have to – it does link in with relationships, surely. The concept of marriage, I suppose I have my own preconceptions about it, therefore you don't want to instil that in the children. For example, same-sex marriages – it's not something I know about. And I don't know how far you can go when teaching you're teaching children. Is it the norm, or do men and women just get married? I mean, what's the answer? Therefore, I'd want more clarification on that, I think.*

Studies have shown the potential impact of teachers' personal beliefs and values on their willingness to teach SRE and to cover particular topics, and on their approach to teaching (Kehily 2002; Walker and Milton 2006). Kehily's (2002) research examined the complex link between four teachers' and one school nurse's own experiences of learning about sex as young people and how their gendered life histories affected their practice. She demonstrated that personal moral values impacted upon the way practitioners viewed SRE and their roles as teachers of sex education. Similarly, within this study, it was repeatedly evident that teachers' biographies and moral values played a part in their approach to the issue of KS1 SRE, with one teacher expressing discomfort based upon her religious beliefs when the subject was of same-sex relationships was raised. She then returned once more to the notion that children should be informed when they are ready or when they ask questions.

Mrs Garrow: *I must admit that that's something I struggle with. Not that I wouldn't be accepting to a same-sex relationship. I would. I would welcome them into my classroom and I would talk to them like I would any other parents. And that's up to them. But as a practising Christian I struggle with it. It's against the teachings of the bible. So, I personally struggle with it. It's not that you – the teaching's not against homosexuality or lesbians as such; it's the act of homosexuality.*

Later the group returned to the topic, with Mr Marshall and Mrs Old, in particular, challenging Mrs Garrow's viewpoint:

Mrs Garrow: *I worry that if we make a big issue of this, it becomes very normalised and I still don't think it's normal for most people.*

Miss Kennedy: *But maybe there are certain parts of this that you would address if you need to.*

Mrs Garrow: *I think that – I accept it happens. And that's okay if people choose to do it that's up to them, but I wouldn't want to think that children are educated into thinking that we all go and do it.*

Mr Marshall: *I would be the other way 'round.*

Mrs Old: *I would be exactly the same.*

Mr Marshall: *I would like it to be included in Key Stage 1.*

Mrs Old: *I think, actually, that we need to normalise it. That's where I think – but that's a difference in our own opinion. And that's a debate.*

This discussion did lead teachers to consider further how the topic of same-sex relationships might be addressed, with the idea of using stories to engage children being proposed.

During focus group sessions, it became evident that most of the teachers respected diversity in the sexuality of the children and their families. However, their discussion was still suffused with heteronormative assumptions. All the teachers expressed at least a tolerance for homosexuality and same-sex relationships, but the extent to which this was the case varied. Religious beliefs and personal experiences were drawn upon to justify and inform individuals' positions relating to teaching pupils about sexuality.

These teachers understood and had considerable experience of the vast range of family types from which children came. The central issue for them was the need to support children to understand their experiences, to develop an understanding of the lives of others and to value their own and others' families. SRE, for these teachers, was not just about preparing these children for the future, but to support them in their understanding of family relationships as they currently encountered and experienced them.

4.6 The heterosexual classroom

All but one teacher expressed a specific desire to be proactive in promoting an anti-homophobia agenda through SRE, while some went further, rhetorically at least, considering this an opportunity to teach children about the meaning and value of diversity. None, however, sought to directly expose or challenge the

heterosexist assumptions that underpinned everyday life in the school or wider society (Epstein 1997; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2001; Macintosh 2007; Paechter 2006a; Renold 2000; Vavrus 2009; Youdell 2006). Aligned to this discussion was the subject of gender identity and stereotyping, and whether and how this should be tackled with young children. Here teachers also considered the extent of children's prior knowledge and from where that might come, and how children would define 'girl' and 'boy' in their everyday lives:

Mrs Brown: *But then he might ask, "Why? Why does that make you a girl?" Or, "Does that particular make you a boy?" There's a difference between the physical aspect and the //*

Miss Macintyre: *The feelings and the emotional side.*

Mr Mayall: *It would be interesting to see whether they identified a physical difference or characteristics.*

Mrs Harvey: *Or characteristics. Yes.*

* * * * *

Miss Peake: *Because some of them might not even be aware that there is a physical difference. If you've got no brothers, and you're a house full of girls, you'll probably, at a very young age, not be aware that there is a physical difference.*

Mrs Brown: *When they see it they ask what it is.*

Miss Peake: *Yes.*

As part of the Christopher Winter Project (2009) scheme of work, children are invited to look at a variety of images of objects and to decide if the objects would be suitable for a girl, a boy or both. The teachers considered this to be a valuable

activity that could serve to begin to challenge stereotypes. Yet, at the same time, some teachers were still reluctant to accept the troubling of aesthetic gender norms. A pair of pink, glitter-covered hair clips provoked conversation with one group.

Mr Hall: *That's more common today. Even now I've got (Mr Hall indicates a pony tail sported by one of the boys in his Year 1 class) and that can actually be --- //*

Mrs Brown: *I know. I know.*

Mr Hall: *And it does cause some upset as well, because of some of the remarks around, "Oh, you're not supposed to have --- ."*

Miss Macintyre: *I think we should challenge //*

Mr Hall: *But then.*

Mrs Brown: *Oh, I agree. But I think those hair clips should stick to the girl. Come on!*

Miss Kennedy: *Yeah, but there's a difference between //*

Mrs Brown: *We're being politically correct.*

Implicit here is the notion of limited acceptable ways of doing boy and doing girl, and the assumption that feminine masculinity equates to homosexuality (Paechter 2006a). The discussion then considered footballers who wear headbands and the acceptability of the 'tomboy' image for girls as opposed to a 'girly-boy' persona.

Miss Macintyre: *But why is it that way round? Girls who dress like boys are just tomboys, and that's quite normal to be a tomboy. But it's much less acceptable to*

be a boy coming in girly-type stuff. I know full well that the second we get out the dress-up half the boys are in girls' stuff. Inverted commas: girls' stuff.

Mr Marshall: *I disagree. I think they should be in there. And if a boy said he did like the pink paperclip – hairclip, sorry – the interesting conversation for me would be, “That’s absolutely fine, but you may receive some teasing”, for instance. Because it still isn’t that acceptable//*

Miss Macintyre: *Or accepted.*

Mr Marshall: *Or accepted. For boys to go around wearing hairclips, or indeed pink hairclips, but there’s nothing wrong with that if that’s what you want to do. I would probably get that expression out again: “be yourself”. But you do expect, perhaps, to get some comments.*

Mr Hall: *I think we’re educating them. But the deep roots of what they’re getting from home, those stereotypes can be very far in-grained. So that’s what we’ve got to combat in school.*

Despite earlier assertions, some teachers were again expressing the need to battle outside influences and to promote a social justice agenda. This group articulated the importance of lessons that tackled heteronormative expressions of identity rooted in the body and was keen to tackle bigotry and promote self-worth.

Mr Hall: *I think it comes back to being flexible and saying, “It’s allowed. It’s normal today.” The stereotypes. We need to get away from stereotypes more and more today.*

Miss Kennedy: *I think we’re here to do it, aren’t we?*

Mr Hall: *Yes, because it's a controlled environment where you can introduce the vocabulary. People who are sitting on one side of the fence too far, because I've taught – unbelievable – by the age of four were incredibly racist and that. And those opinions come from the wrong place. Well, they're not educated opinions. Saying it's acceptable //*

Mrs Brown: *But sometimes you're fighting a losing battle there.*

Miss Macintyre: *I still think you should fight it though, whether you're winning or not.*

Mr Marshall: *Yes, keep up the battle, as it were.*

Some teachers spoke of boys, including their own, experimenting with toys and games traditionally considered more appropriate for girls.

Mrs Garrow: *I have a problem with pink. I mean, boys playing with what's supposed to be girls' toys. I mean, my kids, I've got two boys, they both had pushchairs and teddies and dolls, and they were there to play with if they wanted. They played with them for a bit and then discarded them --- .*

This kind of behaviour was accepted and even facilitated, but was usually seen as a “phase”. However, in the case of one child teachers felt something very different was happening, and ideas of what is “natural” or “normal” came to the fore:

Mrs Harvey: *Because very early on, we get children in nursery who say, “You can't play with that because you're a girl.”*

TW: *Yes.*

Mrs Harvey: *"You can't have that because you're a boy."*

Miss Peake: *Yes.*

Mrs Harvey: *But, I mean, we do, I mean the dressing up clothes, there is one child in particular who wants to wear a dress every day. And, occasionally, there are other boys that will //*

Mrs Old: *I think we have to remember that, you know, boys and girls are wired-up differently. So, girls automatically, although there are some exceptions, and some tomboys who love to go and play rough. But, in general, boys love the rough and tumble, and the big movements, and the running around, and you know so there's that as well.*

Throughout the focus group interviews Mrs Old had been a strong advocate of children's right to be well-informed regardless of parental opposition and the need for them to be taught to value diversity, yet of all the teachers interviewed she most starkly expressed an attachment to embedded notions of what it is to be female or male. This was despite anecdotal evidence from all the staff that children in their care did not all conform to these stereotypes and that they suspected that some did so because of pressure from others.

Miss Redfearne: *I can think of someone in my class who would be hesitant over things he would play with, just because he doesn't like playing football. He equates it with being quite violent and he prefers playing quieter games, and he might, perhaps want to go with the doll or something.*

Mrs Harvey: *And there are going to be those children as well who perhaps don't want to choose something for fear of being//*

Miss Redfearne: *There is. Yes//*

Mrs Harvey: *You're talking about it in general. But there are some children who might not voice their opinion for fear of being//*

Miss Peake: *Because, as a boy, if you wanted to put the doll in both [categories of suitable for a boy and a girl], but you knew//*

Mrs Harvey: *You daren't.*

Here the teachers recognised the power of the heterosexual matrix. Boys who see football as 'violent', who would rather play 'quieter games' or who might consider dolls toys that both boys and girls might enjoy risk undermining their (heterosexual) masculine status. Those who dare to engage in border 'crossing' (Thorne 1993: 121) face the threat of being abused as female, homosexual, Other (Martino 2000; Renold 2001; Skelton 2001). Thus, the options for boys (and for girls) are limited and the boundaries between boys and girls are reinforced. However, not all children accept dominant forms of masculinity and femininity with ease. Reflecting socially dominant, monoglossic accounts of the bodily alignment of male / masculine and female / feminine, one of the nursery teachers discussed the behaviour of one child and classroom practice (Butler 1988, 1990; Connell 1995; Francis 2010). Such is the power of this binary agenda that teachers and teaching assistants in the nursery persisted in organising children according to a discursively constructed definition of male and female which relies on the body as a signifier, despite their observation that this was potentially problematic.

Mrs Harvey: *And we've got a little boy in the nursery at the minute, and he is a boy but he doesn't actually want to be a little boy. He's questioning whether he's a little boy or not.*

Miss Redfearne: *Really. Gosh!*

Mrs Harvey: *And we'll say things like, "Girls line up." We do a lot of things like that in nursery. And he will. We can see him thinking.*

Significantly, none of the other participants challenged this teacher on the nursery's organisational approach and its possible impact on the children in their charge – encompassing all the children, not just this individual – nor did any participant reflect on their own practice in this regard. Indeed, this kind of behaviour on the part of staff (teachers, teaching assistants, dinner supervisors, administrators) was prevalent across the school.

At BCP, as in many other schools, I daily observed children being asked to line up according to whether they were a boy or a girl, or to sit alternately as a punishment or way of managing behaviour (Best 1983; National Union of Teachers (NUT) 2013; Paechter 2006a). Boys were asked to transport equipment around the school because they were stronger than girls or were expected to be “manly” when another child upset them. Girls, on the other hand, were expected to be “ladylike” and asked to complete “domestic” tasks like clearing up after an art lesson. On one occasion, I even viewed a teaching assistant instructing children to line up first if they were ‘sugar and spice’ (girls), to be followed by ‘slugs and snails’ (boys).

Schools have repeatedly been viewed as a site of heterosexual hegemony where discursive processes act to reinforce and regenerate dominant forms of sexual and gender identities (Arnot 2002; Connell 1995; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2001; Kehily 1995; Renold 2005). Moves toward a more data driven education system in which men occupy prestigious and powerful positions within schools, including BCP, support this process. Additionally, the curriculum, pedagogy, and everyday interaction between pupils and teachers work to maintain the *status quo* in terms of gender and adult-children power relations (Kehily 1995).

4.7 'It's so gay': promoting diversity and tackling homophobia

In all three groups, conversations around the need to teach children about different types of families led onto the topic of discrimination and homophobia. Teachers acknowledged that a curriculum that 'systematically teaches pupils about all aspects of difference and diversity' is desirable, even if some parents choose to exercise their right to withdraw children from these lessons (Ofsted 2013: 8).

Miss Macintyre: *Because I personally think, as we've had with racism, it was so common and the only way we've overcome that is by tackling it and I think the same could be said for the misconceptions around sex and relationships. The only way you're ever going to know is to provide children with that knowledge.*

Mr Drake: *I mean there are laws, obviously, in this country to protect against racism, against hate crimes, whatever you want to, however you wish to describe. And I think with tolerance, yes you should teach along those lines and if there are people who object to that, for whatever reason, then I don't think it should affect*

us and sway our direction, because I think we are duty bound, honour bound to be educators and to follow the values of the law. I mean the law is there to protect people and it's there for a reason. We could be seen to be promoting intolerance by not promoting tolerance; we need to be careful. An opt-out makes sense because it allows people to, who want to opt-out. And therefore, whatever, people can make their mind up about that. But from our point of view as teachers we are sticking to a fair, equal, diverse curriculum.

Miss Macintyre: *There can be religious issues around it, around certain aspects, which would mean that that sort of thing would not be acceptable to be discussed. I don't think that that would mean the other children in class shouldn't have that part of their education, if their parents are happy with them having it.*

Mr Drake: *And once again, a diverse range of religious points of view, whether within churches, temples, whatever. One of the finer lines is tolerance within religion, whether there are --- for whatever religious reasons. They should be given the option to opt out because that is their political views. But it shouldn't dictate how a school operates.*

While not challenging parents' rights to withdraw their children from SRE lessons, teachers were aware of the influence of the world outside of the classroom and that they might well be running counter to the values expressed at home.

Mrs Blake: *I think you'd have to be prepared for some parents wanting to withdraw their children because there's a lot of strong feeling, isn't there? And I am totally for children being taught about all the various relationships. And if you don't give*

them an option there will be complaints. I just know from listening to them, there are some terrible, hard prejudice, aren't there?

Mrs Moore: *And as those children go further up the school those prejudices rub off on the children. Whereas, when they're younger ---.*

Mrs Blake: *They don't even know what they're talking about, do they? They ape their parents.*

Mrs Moore: *As teachers, we should be teaching about acceptance, or in the worst case tolerance, because their family prejudices are against what you consider normal. At least we're doing something, and it's for the child to make up their mind. You can't really do much more than that.*

Once again, teachers saw themselves as agents for social change and pondered the potential impact of their teaching on young minds, particularly to combat problems like homophobic bullying: 'I wonder if they learnt about same-sex relationships when they were younger then they wouldn't use the term gay?' (Miss Peake). They also focused on broader concerns than the content of a defined curriculum, recognising that discrete teaching of a curriculum promoting tolerance and valuing diversity would need to be underpinned by a daily assault on the manifestations of homophobia generated at home and in the playground. In this, some were more vociferous than others, comparing an assault on homophobia to previous moves to tackle racism (which they seemed to view largely as a battle fought and won, at least within the school's context). However, when teachers reflected on their lived experiences of responding to homophobic name-calling, which most had witnessed, it was clear that there was no coherent, consistent approach applied to pupils engaged in these kinds of behaviours. Incidents of

homophobic name-calling were not routinely recorded at BCP and teachers, in practice, were often unsure of how to proceed. While aware of the need to counter homophobic abuse, no matter the actual sexuality of the victim, these teachers found it difficult to negotiate a way to do so effectively.

These kinds of inadequacies replicate those identified by Ofsted (2012) and Stonewall (Guasp 2014; Bradlow *et al* 2017). In its *No Place for Bullying* report, Ofsted (2012) summarises the results of its survey of 37 primary schools, where it found that staff in at least 25 of these said they heard the term 'gay' used in a 'derogatory way' in a 'typical week' (Ofsted 2012: 25). Both Ofsted and Stonewall observed that teachers' response to inappropriate language was not consistent and that '[m]any staff in both the primary and the secondary schools commented that pupils did not always know what the term 'gay' meant', or that it had become, in the minds of pupils, divorced from its relationship to sexuality. Statements made by teachers in this regard led Ofsted inspectors to conclude that there was 'an acceptance' of the use of the term to mean 'rubbish' or 'bad' (Ofsted 2012: 27). The consequences of this were outlined in Stonewall's *Teachers' Report* (Guasp 2014). It found that teachers did not always tackle homophobic language, either 'because they believe that the pupils did not understand the meaning of their remarks (42 percent) or because they did not believe pupils were being homophobic (32 percent)' (Guasp, 2014: 6).

When talking about incidents of homophobia, as elsewhere, boys were usually identified as the perpetrators and, more frequently than girls, the victims (Hastie 2013; Kehily 2002; Halstead and Waite 2001). This echoed the findings of studies

in both primary and secondary schools where behaviours ranging from verbal abuse to physical violence have been employed as a means of policing gender and sexuality (Chambers van Loon and Tincknell 2004; Connolly 1998; Renold 2005; Skelton 2001). These teachers recounted a variety of approaches to counter the abuse, but often did so with a lack of confidence that their tactics were either appropriate or achieving the desired effect.

Miss Redfearne: *Someone said they were a lesbian, and I just said that wasn't an appropriate word to be using. In fact, it was this year: "So-and-so called me a lesbian."*

Mrs Brown: *I tell them to go and get a dictionary.*

Miss Redfearne: *I said, "Do you know what that word means?" "No."*

Mrs Brown: *I tell them to get a dictionary.*

Miss Redfearne: *Well, in Year 3 I didn't really think that was appropriate. Maybe I should of, I don't know.*

Mrs Brown: *In Year 6 I get the dictionary out and we look it up: "Have we used that in the correct way? No. So think about the way you use it."*

Miss Redfearne: *I just said it wasn't a word they should be using, and it was said again.*

Mrs Brown: *I don't think they're using to be//*

Miss Thomson: *It's like: "That's just sad."*

TW: *But then what do you feel about the connection between the words 'sad' and the word 'gay' if that's the case?*

Miss Thomson: *I don't think they're making a connection, are they?*

* * * * *

Mrs Old: *My issue is children calling each other 'gay'. Including Bobby: and my son is a child who's had it completely normalized.*

Miss Kennedy: *In Year 3, that's a regular//*

Mrs Garrow: *They don't – it's just a word. It's not got any particular meaning.*

Mr Marshall: *In fact they've taken it over – the word – and probably it's no longer an abusive word in the way we look at it.*

These approaches and attitudes mean that LGBT+ pupils are failed in schools on a regular basis, with potentially harmful outcomes. For example, Stonewall reported that LGBT students between the ages of 11 and 18 admit 'skipping classes', self-harming and attempting suicide as a result of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying (Bradwell *et al* 2017: 7). However, sexuality and homophobic abuse do not necessarily go hand-in-hand, nor, as Mrs Old reported, is it even necessary to break heterosexual gender codes.

Mrs Old: *It's hard. I mean, Bobby called someone a "lesbian" the other day.*

Miss Kennedy: *Does he know what it means?*

Mrs Old: *He knows about --- he knows that a man can love and man and a woman can love a woman, because I've had that discussion like Robert [Marshall] has. And he probably knows the word gay to be two men together. But I've no idea where he's got the word lesbian from. However, you know, but again, I probably did the wrong thing. I chastised him for it. And, you know, you don't call people names. So I did completely the wrong thing.*

Bobby had been attacking a girl called Polly, a clever, pretty, sporty girl, who was rejecting his advances as a potential boyfriend. The impact of calling her a lesbian paid a double dividend for Bobby: he was able to reaffirm his position as the dominant boy in his circle of friends while questioning Polly's legitimacy as a girl. By implication, the only reason she would not accept Bobby's proposal to 'go out' with him could be that she was not interested in boys (a lesbian), not that she had no interest in Bobby as a potential boyfriend. By questioning her heterosexuality Bobby firmly located Polly as Other, thereby obliterating her as a potential girlfriend for his peers, despite his earlier assessment of Polly as an "object of desire" and retaining his position of power.

In some instances, teachers diverted children from their conversations rather than dealing with the problem head-on, and recognised the failings of how they had previously dealt with situations:

Miss Kennedy: *When it's happening in my classroom, I've said, "The discussion you're having at this point is inappropriate at this point"; in class time. So that didn't show them it was necessarily the word they used, but they were having this conversation when they should have been working. Which deflected a little bit. But that's hard isn't it – to get it right?*

These attitudes and the failure to act negate the impact on the victim of the abuse and act to reproduce the heterosexist nature of the primary school. As Warwick *et al* (2004: 22) point out in their report on homophobia and sexual orientation in

schools: 'A homophobic incident is any incident perceived to be homophobic by the victim or another person' and it is clear that the use of this type of language does have a particular impact on children with same-sex parents. According to Stonewall, these children found homophobic remarks 'upsetting and made them think there was something wrong with their family' (Guasp 2014: 7). As with other forms of bullying, homophobia can have a detrimental impact on children's mental and physical wellbeing, in addition to levels of academic attainment. These findings resonate with the responses of teachers at BCP to the use of terms like gay and lesbian as forms of abuse. Furthermore, this represents a failure to address the power relationships that are institutionally and socially sustained and the role pupil actions have in perpetuating these (Preston 2016).

Ofsted's (2013) report went on to identify good practice in dealing with this type of bullying both in schools and the wider community, highlighting those schools taking a well-considered and proactive approach to the problem that led to a significant reduction in these kinds of incidents. Despite the good intentions of staff at BCP, they demonstrated confusion and an inability to take a consistent, confident approach to homophobia and to trouble actively heterosexist practices within the school. This, alongside an administrative approach that saw homophobic incidents go unrecorded, meant that using gay and lesbian as terms of abuse within the school remained effectively unchallenged.

4.8 Professional considerations of gender and maturity

Rather than the need to protect children's innocence, differences in children's levels of maturity were posed as a problem for teachers trying to formulate a curriculum for all.

Miss Macintyre: *Because, I know in the past I had a little boy I taught. He went to a gay wedding and they got married, and they were having a baby. And it was obviously a surrogate mother, and he was asking a lot of questions with a group that I didn't think were mature enough. So I, rather than discuss it with all of them, I just spoke to his mum afterwards, and said what he'd been asking about: "It's entirely up to you: if you want to talk to him, if you want me to talk to him." And we did it that way. But with that particular cohort, and it was Year 1, and I just didn't feel it was appropriate for them. Because not all of them understood.*

Mrs Blake: *No. That's a problem really. It's that, you know, the difference in maturity, I mean, you know in an ideal world as they ask questions you respond to the questions. But, of course, if you're not teaching a class and you're producing a scheme of work, you're going to have some very immature, you know, of them in there, aren't you? It's difficult.*

Concerns of maturity and gender were linked. Mrs Blake thought it was better to teach the boys and girls separately because she felt this represented a better environment for girls to explore sensitive issues.

Mrs Blake: *They're not too worried about looking silly, or saying something silly when it's just girls together. Or intimate. I think it's better separately.*

TW: *Is that because//*

Mrs Moore: *They discuss a lot about puberty, don't they. And er ---//*

Mrs Blake: *Yeah.*

Mrs Moore: --- changes in their bodies. And I do think the girls are more comfortable that with the boys in there as well.

Mrs Blake: No. And I think the boys will be silly as well.

The Year 5 teachers had considered teaching boys and girls together but were discouraged by their perceived relative maturity levels and the possibility of boys exhibiting low level disruptive behaviour.

Mrs Blake: I know that, you know, the girls tend to be more mature, don't they? You know. But we had thought about that [mixed classes].

Mr Drake: But time. The boys have a session with me. It's early in Year 6 when the boys are getting used to their development that – which I think for the boys seems to work. For Year 6 boys, as opposed to Year 5 boys. I mean, the variety of maturity they have.

Mrs Moore: You mean the girls are more mature anyway; there have been year groups when the boys have been asking inappropriate, well, not inappropriate questions. Just trying to push the boundaries a bit as to what they can ask with the nurse, and I know Robert [Marshall] had to step in. It wasn't last year, it was the year before, with some of the questions that were being asked by some of the boys. Whereas, the girls seem to, they're obviously a little bit more mature.

This perspective, restated elsewhere, potentially leads teachers into dangerous territory in terms of their role as educators (Milton 2001; Halstead and Waite 2001; Walker and Milton 2006). In no other subject would this group of teachers decide to teach or to not teach a child something on the basis of their level of maturity.

They would consider their prior knowledge and understanding, which in this case might be sorely lacking due to a failure to teach SRE until Years 5 and 6 and would use a differentiated approach to ensure that children had the opportunity to progress. Furthermore, while the teachers clearly do cling to some stereotypical portrayals of boys' and girls' traits, it is difficult to conceive of another situation where they would treat all the girls and all the boys in such a uniform manner: as if *all* girls are "mature" and *all* boys are "silly" and likely to exhibit challenging behaviour. Yet at the same time teachers do acknowledge that these stereotypes would not apply to all girls or all boys.

In the example above, the fact that Mr Marshall felt the need to intervene on behalf of the school nurse raises some issues. First, this potentially undermines the authority of the female nurse, ensuring power rests with the male teacher (as her protector) and male pupils, who have the upper hand in that they are setting the agenda, albeit for a short space of time due to Mr Marshall's intervention. Thereby, gender power relations are reinforced. Secondly, it negates the possibility that these boys are asking questions that teachers consider to be "pushing the boundaries" because they have a genuine desire to learn.

Boys have repeatedly been regarded as a problem in sex education in a manner that to some degree mirrors that focused on boys' underachievement more broadly (Davidson 1996; Haste 2013; Hilton 2001, 2003). In boys' defence, Haste, in her study of an all-boys secondary school, notes that:

. . . boys' contributions to sex education lessons can be graphic, explicit and sexist and may refer to sexual practices that are socially taboo and considered offensive. They also illustrate that not all questions containing sexually explicit language or that refer to pornography are impertinent or intended to shock or offend. (Haste 2013: 523)

None of the teachers here suggested that at KS1 girls and boys should be taught separately. There was minimal concern that children's innocence might be compromised. There was also scant discussion of sexualisation or of the commercialisation of children's sexuality; rather, there was a quiet awareness that children would see and hear things that they might not understand and that it was the job of educators to ensure that they had the information they would need to function and feel valued in the world beyond the school gates. These teachers could see beyond the themes that appear so frequently in political pronouncements and media hyperbole. They were, however, concerned that some children would not be "ready" for some aspects of the SRE curriculum and found it difficult to negotiate a way to address this problem that ensured all pupils received an equal entitlement to this type of education.

4.9 Conclusion

Throughout these interviews, teachers repeatedly drew upon their personal and professional experiences to support their thinking on SRE. The views of teachers in this study were not uniformly held, but they did manage to achieve some broad consensus regarding the aims and content of sex education for young children.

All of the staff considered it their role to educate children to understand the world they inhabit, to build upon and explore children's lived experiences and to ensure that they felt valued as members of the school community. Further, they believed it was their duty to take a long view. They recognised that what children learn in the early stages of their schooling will form the basis for their future education and their lives beyond. They hoped to lay the foundations for children to become productive, successful members of society who could live with whatever gender identity they choose without fear of retribution. In this they recognised they might be challenging the views of parents and the broader community, which they regarded with a degree of trepidation, but saw their role as agents for positive social change.

The details of what should be taught were more challenging and there was some divergence of opinion. Some teachers found it difficult to reach a definitive decision about what they would consider appropriate, sometimes vacillating between viewpoints. Most were happy to teach children the names of genitalia, although there was some indecision about exactly which of these would be appropriate, in part due to the challenging nature of some of the science. Many of the teachers could see the merit of introducing children to pleasurable aspects of sex but lacked confidence in the best way to address this with young children. All were keen to teach children to accept, if not necessarily value, diversity. Gender stereotypes were thought to be a suitable and valuable topic at KS1, but here teachers' own adherence to ingrained stereotypes represented something of a barrier.

On the subject of families, teachers were quick to acknowledge that the children at BCP came from a vast range of family types and were keen that they should feel comfortable with this. This meant that same-sex relationships were moved onto the agenda for teaching at KS1, with only one teacher having a significant problem with this in principle.

A recurring theme within the conversations was one of pedagogy. Teachers identified different approaches to delivering the SRE curriculum and were clearly focused on the need for clear progression in learning across year groups and key stages. They were concerned that learning should take place in a variety of ways, both implicit and explicit. In addition to discrete SRE lessons that might feature circle time and stories, they outlined the need for an embedded approach to teaching, cross-curricular lessons and the benefits of peer support. Their desire to teach children in a way that matched their maturity levels was not, on the whole, about protecting children's innocence, but concerned with giving children information at a time when they are able to understand it and when it is relevant.

The main stumbling blocks to the successful delivery of the teachers' preferred SRE curriculum were fears of parental responses and their own lack of confidence. For these reasons, they were eager to have a set, clear curriculum established and to learn from "experts". They were also relatively at ease with the ability of parents to withdraw their children from SRE lessons, despite the possibility that this might have a detrimental effect in meeting the needs of the children.

Chapter 5: Parents' views about sex and relationships education for young children

Homophobic bullying most obviously took place on the playground but did sometimes occur in corridors or classrooms. The boys, in particular, knew the power of calling into question the sexuality of peers when engaged in an argument:

Alan sat next to Jake in the Year 2 classroom. Alan was irritating Jake by prodding him in the side. Jake's response was to shout at Alan that he was a 'faggot' and that he was going to 'rape' him.

5.1 Introduction

Talking to parents who volunteered to take part in this study revealed the importance they placed on ensuring their children were prepared for and protected from the world around them. Parents' enthusiasm for KS1 SRE was tempered by their desire that their children should remain innocent. They often wanted to take the role of educator, but were often held back by lack of knowledge, confidence and experience, and were generally content with the idea that teachers would have the necessary training and be well-placed to provide some of the education they felt their children needed. What this education should comprise was less clear cut in the minds of parents, who frequently acknowledged their own uncertainty and contradictory opinions.

In this chapter, I begin with a brief examination of parent participants' views on whether or not children in KS1 should receive SRE in schools. I locate this discussion within a broader context of surveys seeking to illuminate parents' views on this subject. I then move on to examine the impact of the hegemonic childhood discourse of innocence on these parents' ideas about what children need in terms of SRE. I also highlight the link between gender and innocence, with a particular focus on the position of girls within this discourse.

In section 5.4, the parents' values and diverse experiences of family life are explored. When examining the question of the family, the issue of same-sex relationships arose and was the focus of much debate, which is reflected in this section of the chapter. During these discussions some core values emerged in regard to relationships. It was also evident that parents' experiences within their own families and friendship groups influenced their thinking around curriculum content.

In addition to the theme of childhood innocence, what came through clearly in focus group discussions was the strength of heteronormative assumptions that drove much of parents' thinking. This section also demonstrates that compulsory heterosexuality underpinned parents' notions of gender identity.

The question of biology was addressed in the focus groups. Mothers' and fathers' sometimes conflicting perspectives are discussed in section 5.6, as are the ways

that participants' thinking developed through taking part in focus group discussions.

In the final two sections, parents' experiences of SRE and their confidence in delivering it to their own children are explored. This leads into a discussion of parents' attitudes to school-based SRE and the concept of school-parent partnerships.

5.2 Do parents want school-based SRE for their children?

A number of organisations have surveyed parental participation in and perspectives on children's SRE and have used their findings to lobby Parliament to make SRE compulsory in schools (BBC News Online 2011a; Durex *et al* 2010; Mumsnet 2011; NAHT 2013; SEF 2014). However, looking deeper into the surveys, it is apparent that many parents have reservations about what and when this should be taught.

The National Association of Head Teachers' (NAHT) (2013: n.p) survey of parental attitudes to SRE is frequently cited by those who wish to promote compulsory teaching of the subject, as its results showed that 88% of parents were in favour of mandatory 'sex education and lessons on adult and peer relationships' (ATL 2014; Brook *et al* 2014; Relate 2014; SEF 2013). However, with its central focus on the dangers of pornography, the survey did little to elicit parents' views about what 'mandatory SRE' would mean in practice and did not ask when it should begin (NAHT 2013: n.p.). Likewise, Mumsnet's (2011: n.p.) sex education survey is often cited for its 92% headline figure of parents being in

favour of compulsory sex education in schools (ATL 2014; Relate 2014; SEF 2013). However, read more thoroughly, the same survey reveals that a mere 28% of respondents believed this should occur when children fall into the four- to six-years old bracket and only 39% when children are aged seven to nine (Mumsnet 2011, n.p.).

Some surveys do provide additional information regarding subject content, but even in these instances there exists a good deal of ambiguity. In 2014, the SEF, in conjunction with the National Children's Bureau (NCB), published survey results from a poll of 1,000 parents of children between four and sixteen years (SEF 2014). The survey echoed the findings of Mumsnet (2011) and the NAHT (2013) as it showed 'the majority [of parents] want schools to teach a broad and balanced curriculum that helps primary pupils understand their bodies, appropriate behaviour and online safety' (SEF 2014: n.p.). Among the topics that parents hoped children would learn about were 'the difference between safe and unwanted touching' (78%); 'what to do if they find online pictures showing private body parts or are asked to send them' (72%); and 'the medically correct terms for sexual organs such as vagina and penis' (64.5%) (SEF 2014: n.p.). What was lacking was the age at which parents wanted these topics to be addressed. After all, primary school covers an age range from four to eleven years. Thus, despite an apparent desire for primary schools to take up these issues in the classroom, there still exists a high degree of uncertainty about what parents really want for their children at any given age.

At the beginning of these focus group interviews, parents were asked a very open question about how they felt about the principle of providing SRE for KS1 children. Rather than debating whether or not there was a need for SRE, most parents immediately began to speculate about what this would mean in practice. At first, some parents erroneously thought that I would be able to tell them what to expect.

Mrs Winston: *I'm quite happy for you to teach it, but I don't know how in depth you are wanting to go. So I'm open to listening to what you say first, before making an opinion.*

Over the course of six focus group interviews, there emerged a broad range of sometimes conflicting views about curriculum content. From the outset, different perspectives began to emerge; some of this disagreement and uncertainty was overcome through discussion. Even at this early stage in the process parents were beginning to raise the issue of pleasure and shying away from this in favour of a scientific approach combined with an emphasis on positive relationships.

Mrs Gage: *How we feel – because we don't know what you're talking about yet.*

TW: *In principle do you think they should be taught something?*

Mrs Gage: *Yes.*

Mrs Waites: *I'd agree with that.*

TW: *And beyond that, what kind of shape and extent that you should go to?*

Mrs Gage: *I personally think at a young age it should be more of, I don't know, because it should come into personal hygiene. Revolving around that, rather than*

relationships so much. Obviously, differences between male and female, maybe. But anything beyond that I think they're way too young.

Mr Egan: *I disagree with that, really. I think there's a scientific approach to it, because of the birds, bees and --- why do people have sex. Why is sex around from an animal point of view, and the relationship bit, from my point of view comes differently. It's like, human beings are different from that element. So there's an element of care and consideration that needs to be put forward in the basis of this. There's sex for regeneration and there's sex for other elements. From a human being side of it we've got to get away from, in my point of view, the brutal way sex is treated in current society. In that it's there for fun and pleasure, and the relationship side of it is just not talked about at all.*

Mr Ling: *I think in relation to, I mean there are two sides to this coin. You're talking about sex, what does a five, six, seven year old think? What are they aware of? From my point of view, I don't want to go into the mechanics of the thing, because they aren't aware of it at that age. But the relationships side, I think they are aware. They're forming relationships themselves anyway; ours is always running around: "Yes, I've got a girlfriend." So, they are aware of that side, and I think that should be the emphasis, from my point of view.*

Surveys also demonstrate the existence of a significant minority of parents who are very much against their children receiving SRE in primary school. In 2011, BabyChild, a commercial website established to help parents to source baby products, conducted a survey of 1,732 UK parents of children between the ages of seven and eleven years. They found that 59% responded negatively to the question: 'Do you agree with the fact that sex education is often taught to children

in schools, even from a young age?', and 48% felt that sex education should not begin until children are 13. This, despite the fact that 47% of those surveyed stated that their children had asked them about sex when they were four or five, and over a third were embarrassed by being asked about sex by their child (*Teaching Times* N.D.: n.p.).

Although not all parental objections to SRE are faith-based, many who have strong reservations about school-based SRE do express their views through organisations with links to religious groups (Christian Concern 2018; Christian Institute 2016; Paton 2015; SPUC 2015). For example, the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC), an evangelical Christian charity, runs a 'Safe at School' service that 'provides advice and support to parents who face unacceptable SRE in their children's schools' (SPUC 2015: n.p.). Picking out the Christopher Winter Project's (2009) scheme of work and Channel 4's *All About Us* DVD (Channel 4 2006) for particular criticism, SPUC's campaign director, Antonia Tully, claimed that:

This resource distresses parents because, among other reasons, it presents sexual intercourse as a fun activity which makes you happy. There is surely a concern that telling children sex is pleasurable might be making a child more susceptible to sexual predators. (SPUC 2017, n.p.)

The organisation takes the line that parents are primarily responsible for their children's sexual education, leading Tully to attack the prospect of new legislation

to make SRE compulsory as ‘an Orwellian “Big Brother” nightmare writ large’ (SPUC 2017: n.p). Again, we see a concern that children might be taught about pleasure, this time rhetorically associated with child protection issues. Indeed, in the case of SPUC, the implicit exclusion of LGBT+ children and young people from sex education through this pleasure vacuum becomes explicit in the organisation’s call for parents to respond to the government’s RSE consultations. Here they refer to the expectation that RSE should be ‘LGBT inclusive’ as one of the ‘concerning aspects of the New Draft regulations and Guidance’ (SPUC 2018, n.p.).

Both Mr Heymann and Mrs Paxton held firm religious beliefs that informed their thinking on SRE in schools. For Mr Heymann this meant that ‘responsibility falls mainly to the parents’, but that it would be good for schools and parents to be ‘unified’ in this. Mrs Paxton, however, stood apart from other parents both in terms of what she felt the school’s role was in regard to SRE and what she was happy to share with her children. She was worried that her children thought that ‘everything the teacher tells them is right. So, everything that Miss has told them is right, no matter what my opinion is on stuff.’ She was clear that ‘people do things, have different views from me, but I wouldn’t want that putting onto my young children, because I would want to teach them how I felt about it first.’

Among the parent participants, it was quickly established that all but Mrs Paxton broadly agreed with the provision of SRE for KS1 children. The real matters for debate were what should be included and in which year group.

5.3 Too much too young?: Parents' attachment to the discourse of childhood innocence

The discourse of childhood innocence has long dominated media and political rhetoric regarding childhood sexualisation and attempts to provide children with SRE (Bailey 2011; BBC 2010; Bragg *et al* 2011; Ross 2010; Tait 2015; The Guardian 2011). For example, in Sheffield one parent's response to Grenoside Primary School's efforts to consult parents about the form its SRE programme should take was to protest that, 'children should be allowed to be children – we do not want them growing up too quickly' (Bowater 2011: n.p.). Similarly, a parent respondent to the *Bailey Review's* (2011) investigation expressed concern about children 'knowing too much at their age. You want to protect their innocence' (Bailey 2011: 46). Furthermore, in April 2011 during Prime Minister's Question Time, queries regarding the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood led David Cameron to respond: 'As a parent of three little ones, I know that it is incredibly worrying to see what is becoming available in some shops and other places. We are effectively asking our children to grow up too early' (Crewe and Nantwich Guardian 2011: 5).

Despite the worries expressed from a range of quarters, a survey carried out on behalf of the National Association of Head Teachers in 2014 showed that while 'the vast majority of parents (83 per cent) feel that childhood is under threat in the twenty-first century largely due to children's early exposure to adult themes [in the media]', only '34 per cent of parents have installed parental controls on devices that can access television programmes or stream material from the internet' (NAHT 2014: n.p.). What we see here, is parents expressing fear for their children

but not feeling the need to take control over their access to media and internet content, a pattern that was reflected among the parents who took part in this study.

Throughout this debate 'childhood innocence', just like 'sexualisation' remains ill-defined. Studies undertaken in the UK, based upon data gathered from focus groups with parents of young children, revealed that parents censor the information shared with their children due to concerns about loss of childhood innocence, particularly where girls were concerned (McGinn *et al* 2016; Stone, Ingham and Gibbins 2013). The majority of parents who took part in these research projects claimed they 'desired an open relationship whereby their child could approach them for information' (McGinn *et al* 2016: 1). However, they used a variety of tactics to evade this, including limiting discussion to a very narrow view of biology and reproduction and waiting until children asked questions, to which they often responded with delaying tactics. In these studies, the preservation of innocence (communicated in a variety of ways) was frequently cited by parents as a reason for restricting the information they gave to their children. For some parents, the term meant a state of ignorance; some focused on their children's behaviour and others found articulating what they meant by innocence and, even more so, non-innocence challenging. All regarded childhood innocence in a positive light and sought to protect this by rationing their children's access to information. Even so, they were unclear where the boundary sits between a child retaining and losing innocence.

Parents in the BCP focus groups, like those who have participated in other studies, expressed a desire for their children to be equipped with an 'appropriate'

understanding of the world in which they live (Berne *et al* 2000; Davies and Robinson 2010; McGinn *et al* 2016; Milton, 2002; Stone, Ingham and Gibbins 2013). However, they simultaneously expressed concerns related to the fear of a loss of childhood innocence, or of childhood itself (so closely are the two concepts intertwined), at times identifying a tension here or acknowledging a lack of certainty about the best way forward.

As discussions opened, some parents initially focused on their worries about formal SRE and where this might lead.

Mr Heymann: *I'd like to think, at the moment. I mean Billy, he's just turned six; I'd like to think he doesn't even know what sex is. I mean, I might be completely wrong//*

Miss Gage: *I mean they're children. That's --- they grow up too quick.*

* * * * *

Mrs Paxton: *. . . so it does concern me a little bit because, you know, they talk about Key Stage 1 now, because I think they're still very young children. Probably most of them, you know, yes they have got older siblings and so they will hear, the ones with older siblings or older friends will hear some things. Some little questions, like: "How was I born?" But sometimes I think we give them far too much that they don't need to know. It stops them being young and enjoying themselves as children.*

Other mothers explained the conflict they experienced when it came to this issue.

Mrs Winston: *I mean, as far as I'm concerned, I've got a six-year old and I've got one in Key Stage 2. I mean, there's certain things that I don't particularly want my six-year old to know yet. I want him to be a child and be completely oblivious to what's going on. I mean, later on he's going to find out, and myself or someone like yourself is there to guide him along, but I don't know how much I want him to know yet --- I want to keep my child a child as long as possible. I don't know. I'm quite happy for them to learn things about sex, because I know they're going to talk about it as they get older, and I don't want them to be so naïve when they get older that it's going to be a shock to them. I would like them to be broken in gently, but I don't want them to know all the gory details yet.*

Other parents were alarmed by what they read or heard in the media about the way SRE has reportedly been taught elsewhere and sought reassurance.

Mrs Fellowes: *I think for myself, personally, one of the main things, my main concern is, that I read in the paper about videos: quite explicit videos being used for infants. And I just don't think that's appropriate yet. So, as long as they're not doing that in school, that would be okay.*

From the outset, most parents agreed that some school-based SRE would be beneficial for KS1 children, but they were troubled by what might be covered and how it would be taught. They also sometimes expressed a degree of confusion or

uncertainty about the desired extent and possible negative impact of their children's learning:

Mrs Thomas: . . . you want them to learn, and you want them to know correctly. You don't want them to be told that the stork brings a baby, etc., but I want to mollycoddle them a bit. I don't know if I want them to know exactly how it's done. I don't know. I don't know. Maybe I do want them to know, but it's how it's said more than anything. I don't know.

Reflecting the 'cultural myth' (Baldo *et al* 1993 quoted in Walker and Milton 2006: 422) that sex education promotes sexual activity, some parents expressed fears that too much information would encourage sexual experimentation and promiscuity. However, numerous studies demonstrate that this is far from the case (Kirby, Laris and Rolleri 2007; Mueller, Gavin and Kulkarni 2008; World Health Organisation 2010). Kirby, Laris and Rolleri' (2007), for example, reviewed 83 academic studies seeking to evaluate the impact of sex education and HIV education programmes on the sexual behaviour of under-25s. Drawing these studies from across the world they concluded that there was 'strong' evidence that these programmes did not 'hasten the initiation of sex' (Kirby, Laris and Rolleri 2007: 214). Furthermore, they claimed that two thirds of programmes led to 'delayed or reduced sexual activity or increased condom or contraceptive use or both' among adolescents and young adults (Kirby, Laris and Rolleri 2007: 213). Nonetheless, parents were concerned about what they saw as the potential negative effects of SRE for young children.

Miss Gage: *I do agree that it does need teaching. Because my daughter actually thinks that the word “sexy” and “sexual” is naughty words, and I don’t know where that comes from because I’m not a prude in any way. I just think there needs to be boundaries, as in I’m quite concerned what they will be taught at that age, because there are so many teenage pregnancies. Now this could go one way or the other, it could either encourage them, or not. And it depends on what is taught.*

Parents also made the link between appearance, education and action. The ideas that girls’ bodies betray their simultaneous threatening sexuality and fragile innocence, and that sex education might serve to accelerate a perceived sexualised aesthetic into sexual action are the subject of much discussion in a number of quarters (e.g. Egan and Hawkes 2013; Papadopolous 2010; Rush and La Nauze 2006; Walkerdine 1997; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2001). It is little wonder, then, that this should arise as a concern for parents.

Mrs Winston: *But the worry is that kids think of trying it earlier because of things that are --- you know. I’m not saying it would happen, but there’s always that possibility. Because they do want, especially girls, want to be more grown-up, don’t they? With the stilettos and the lipstick and the nail varnish that I see in the morning. What’s next? Are they going to be curious?*

Here we see the repeated refrain that sexual knowledge is dangerous, especially for little girls who enjoy dressing like a ‘grown-up’, perhaps, dressing like the sort of woman whose sexuality is often seen to be evidenced by her appearance. As on the playground, what a girl does is a lot less important than how she is

positioned by others. Lees' (1996: 1) assertion that 'the policing of women through sexual reputation starts in adolescence' is actually evident in the lives of much younger girls.

Conversely, some parents explained that their children lacked sufficient curiosity to ask questions or that their children would avoid conversations about sex. They assumed this showed their children were not "ready" for SRE. However, these parents might not recognise their children's desire to ask questions and to gain reliable information from their parents (Walker 2001).

Mrs Paxton: *I think sometimes we push learning onto them, when they don't need to know at that age. And I would say, if they didn't ask the question then I would say it's not important at that age.*

* * * * *

Mrs Fellowes: *Yes, I suppose mine don't actually ask a lot of questions. So, unless I, sort of, I think unless they ask me I won't bring it up quite yet. But I would never be afraid to say. I wouldn't say, "We're not going to talk about that." You know.*

While parents read the absence of questioning and reluctance to take part in dialogue as a sign that children were either uninterested or not yet ready to discuss and understand these issues, it may well be that they have already learnt that sex is a 'taboo' subject and suppress their desire to seek information (Davies

and Robinson 2010: 253; Frankham 2006; Milton 2003; Walker and Milton 2006). What is more, as Davies and Robinson (2010: 249) point out, in their exploration of the 'risk and regulation associated with giving children accurate knowledge about sexuality', this is not an approach that is generally taken toward educating children: we do not wait for a child to ask to be taught how to read, to subtract or to have electricity explained to them. As noted above, the idea that children are only ready to receive information when they specifically ask for it is clearly at odds with the way they are generally taught, both at home and in school. This attitude serves two purposes and produces a contradictory position: it reinforces the belief that children are non-sexual or innocent beings and places the responsibility for initiating discussions about sex firmly with the children. In this scenario, knowledge is in the hands of parents who see themselves as justifiably limiting the information they give to their children and avoiding giving full or direct responses to queries until they decide that their children are 'ready' to receive the information (Frankham 2006).

Fears of a loss of childhood innocence were tempered to some degree by an acknowledgement of children's curiosity and agency in their own education. Most parents appeared untroubled by this, although some admitted a degree of discomfort or embarrassment. While some children asked their parents direct questions about the birth of babies, the differences between girls and boys and relationships of all kinds, others had taken it upon themselves to investigate.

Ms Knight: *Because I think at a very young age, I mean Tanya [age 5] now, she gets a little bit shy about it. She's got a cousin, and he's a little boy, and if he's*

getting changed she'll always try and peek at his botts. She'll laugh and giggle, go all shy, and, "Ooh, I've seen your willy!" And --- so they do. And they're always trying to . . . You know what men are like, and Marcus always, "Ooh, get them [the children] out." And they're always trying to have a look. So, they are inquisitive, even when they're at that age: in Reception.

Hugh and Stephanie Ling acknowledged their son Mick's agency and potential benefits of SRE when they recalled a recent incident:

Mrs Ling: *We already caught Mick Googling girls' bums, haven't we?*

Mr Ling: *Because he said he wanted to know.*

Mrs Ling: *He was about to go to a swimming party, and he just wanted. We don't even know why he wanted//*

Mr Ling: *He said --- We said, "Why have you done this? You're not in trouble, but what made you think of looking at this?" And he said, "I just wasn't sure why girls are different to boys. I wanted to see something." First, he started with naked people, and it brought up some artistic black and white photos of someone from behind, apparently. So, he said, "That was only a man." He said, "And I'm a man," because that's what he says. "But I don't know why girls were different." So, he thought he'd look at bottoms.*

Mrs Ling: *But he sees it all the time because, obviously, he's got a little sister and they bath together. But he doesn't understand.*

Mrs Fellowes: *Maybe that's why he should have been taught.*

Mrs Waites: *It's that natural inquisitiveness.*

Despite acknowledging their children's interest and declaring their openness, some parents recounted occasions when they employed a range of tactics to avoid fully responding to their children's questions. These strategies included moving 'on to another topic relatively quickly' (Mrs Winston); deferring to the knowledge of another parent: 'I'll talk to daddy and get back to them about it' (Mrs Thomas); and delaying until a later date.

Ms Knight: *But I think nowadays, with the TV, I've found that a bit difficult. I mean Jeremy Kyle. The other day, the kids were off, and I was just flicking and it said, "I found secret condoms." So, Charlotte says, "Mum, what are condoms?" (Gasps) I thought, and she really caught me off guards. And I said, "They're just something you use when you're older, and we'll talk about that when you're a little bit older."*

Research undertaken by Martin and Torres (2014) shows that, given the right circumstances, parents will share sexual knowledge with their children. Parents agreed to read a book to their children (aged between three and five) about 'where babies come from' (Martin and Torres 2014: 177). During and following book readings, children asked questions and sought clarification in an effort to elicit information. Sometimes the children were quite persistent and parents often shared more information than they had originally intended. What emerged was a picture of parents and children working effectively together, with children taking an active role in their own sexual education.

In this study, parents' recounted conversations in which their children were active in seeking answers to a whole range of questions about sex and relationships.

While some questions elicited clear and frank responses, others were met with evasion and delaying tactics. Sometimes this depended on the type of question being asked, on other occasions it depended on the general attitude of the parent. However, Mrs Thomas did admit that her tactics of foreclosure ultimately were likely to be unsuccessful due to her sons' persistence: 'They expect some kind of an answer and fobbing them off doesn't work.'

It might well be the case that these parents saw themselves as good mothers or good fathers because by withholding information they were protecting their children's innocence and, thereby, their childhoods. Indeed, Davies and Robinson (2010: 255) report the case of a mother who spoke to them privately because she feared being labelled a 'bad mother' if she admitted that she had shared 'sexual knowledge' with her daughter that others might frown upon. It may, therefore, even be the case that parents who took part in this study failed to disclose some of the information they shared with their children having gauged the tenor of the conversation within their focus groups.

Although they did not engage in an extensive discussion related to safeguarding, one group of mothers felt that SRE might equip children to protect themselves by giving them the ability to recognise abuse, and to give them the tools and opportunity to report this should it occur. In this group of parents, it was not only strangers that were regarded as a potential danger and they were clear that children might need to be protected from members of their own families. They also considered experiences within their own families and the impact of social media. However, as with parents in Davies and Robinson's (2010) study, they did

distance themselves and their families from the possibility that their own children might be abused within their own immediate family.

Ms Franklin: *The other aspect, and I don't know whether it's for this forum or not, but I'll just briefly mention it, from a safeguarding perspective. Discussing things like this at Year 2 level might actually bring things out that are not very nice. That might raise awareness to that child. They might think, well, I'm not going to give you any examples, but they might think, well that doesn't happen to me, and this has happened to me, and now they're in a forum, because they've had a bit of education about it, that they can put their hand up and say, "Actually, Miss." There might be a possibility that, actually, we can safeguard some children as well from this. But just a little bit of education.*

The parents moved between issues related to children's safety, from considering potential family connections to the dangers of the internet and what they might do to protect their children. For some, experiences within their own extended families led them to be particularly concerned.

Ms Knight: *I think it's important for children as well that maybe being taught in school, they may be going through something at home where they think, "That isn't normal. What I'm being taught in school and what is happening here isn't right." So, it isn't, because every child's different. And to think what they're going through ---*

CG: *And the other thing, to look at it in a really black, dark scenario is what if they're being abused?*

Ms Knight: Yes, that's what I mean.

Mrs Fellowes: Say you've got an uncle. I'm just saying an uncle, but you know – they need to know what's right. What's wrong.

Ms Knight: Yes, they do.

Mrs Fellowes: And that can happen from one, or as babies.

Ms Knight: Yes. And I've looked after children in care, and it could be that you have child who's been in care and they would know quite a lot. That if they have been abused, and could potentially tell a child who knows nothing: "You do this, this, this and this." Because it's completely normal to them. So, what they're learning from other children, be to your child would be//

Mrs Fellowes: Yes, and from the internet. I don't really go on Facebook. But if they started chatting, type of thing, then they pick up//

Ms Knight: But you don't know//

Mrs Fellowes: And they pick up these//

Mrs Thomas: This internet stuff, it's the chat stuff terrifies me.

Mrs Fellowes: And they're making out they're a friend, and they're not//
It's where you go with these things isn't it?

TW: So do you think in that case that we should quite explicitly, openly, talk about bad touching and good touching?

ALL: Yes. Definitely.

Mrs Thomas: Yes. I think they need to know that early on to prevent any kind of abuse. Or if it is happening they're able then to go to their teacher and say, "Well, this happened. Is this not the good kind?"

Mrs Fellowes: That's really important.

Ms Knight: *And nowadays, shocking as it is, and I wish my girls didn't have to be taught that. But nowadays I think they do. I think we've become a lot more open minded I think, and//*

Mrs Fellowes: *I mean, I'm not saying, not all stepfathers are like that, but when mum brings home a new boyfriend or whatever, I think --- It just is, like you say, at an early age they've got to know about//*

Ms Knight: *Definitely.*

Mrs Thomas: *They're not going to go and look at a sex register and go and find out whether --- Then again, most parents don't even look into that kind of thing. Especially, I mean I would dread having a date right now. I'd be checking everybody was safe to be around my kids.*

Ms Knight: *And obviously, there's safety on line. As they get older. My niece, she's on Facebook. I mean she's 15 now. When she was 11, 12, she went through the scenario. Added somebody. Thought they were a friend. Umm, and he ended up not a friend. He was a grown man. It's still going through court at the moment because he'd gone through all sorts. . . . Charlotte [daughter] now wants to be on Moshy Monsters and they had friend on there. And I'm, like, "No." Because people can add you.*

Parents started from a position where they acknowledged the potential benefits of SRE, both at home and in school. They wanted children to be informed so that they could understand the world around them and so that they would not need to take it upon themselves to try to find answers to their questions. They could also see the importance of SRE from a child protection point of view. However, their desire to protect children's innocence meant that they were unsure of the extent

to which they wanted their children to be informed and they were even reluctant to answer children's questions, despite defining 'readiness' for sex education in these very terms. In the case of girls, they also foresaw a danger of children being encouraged to sexually experiment as a result of learning about sex and relationships.

5.4 Relationships and Families: experiences and values

As Halstead and Reiss (2003) demonstrate, the very decision to teach SRE is itself value-laden, even before we decide what and how to teach as part of the curriculum. Parents in this study were explicit about their own values, those they were happy to have communicated to their children and how they would deal with alternative values to their own being taught. They also talked about the diversity of their own families, and the array of relationships their children would encounter in all manner of ways, and were keen for them to explore these, beginning with friendship and family.

Mrs Waites: *Taking it from the early days of friendships – you've got to work, it's give and take. You've got to be there for one another. You might have a fall out one day, then you make friends. And all that give and take. And that follows through for teaching more about relationships as well.*

There also existed an understanding that children come from all different kinds of homes, and that they would bring a range of their own values to lessons that would likely be shared with the rest of the class if an open setting were provided. For the

most part parents viewed this possibility positively, sometimes drawing experiences with their own parents to explain why.

Mr Egan: *And, also if you actually teach it talking about the views of the children, you'll get the values that they're being taught by their parents as well, won't you? So you'll get that sort of mix. So, I think the more open it is and the more free it is --- but at the level of their age, it just allows them to discuss things and be open. And then they'll come back and discuss things with their parents hopefully, because obviously there's a mixed group of parents out there. The aim is to spin the positive sides out to those children who might not get that //*

Mrs Fellowes: *I think that's a real opportunity with this sort of education. Because they're all like a mixed bag out there, and there are lots of children who miss out on this sort of//*

Miss Gage: *Yes. I didn't have a clue. You know when I was younger.*

Mrs Fellowes: *I mean, just the values and things.*

Miss Gage: *And it was literally from friends and friends' parents, from what they taught them. Because my mum and dad were very --- about things like that. Although on the other hand I think they had fantastic values, because I've never been married because you know I believe in marriage for life. They've been married for a long time. So, there's good bits and bad bits of everything that will show. It'll all come through as well.*

There was not total agreement on values, but parents did want their children to understand that all types of relationships should be based on honesty, love and respect. The principle that relationships come with consequences and

responsibilities was a message that parents wanted instilled in their children. For most of the parents, however, the legal status of a partnership and the gender of the individuals in a relationship were far less important, and for some of no significance. The general view was that all positive relationships should be understood and accepted. Beyond this, most parents felt that if their personal values were different or went beyond this then it was their role to educate their children.

Mr Heymann: . . . if you do have separate religious beliefs, then it's your responsibility to teach your children. To raise them.

Mrs Fellows: In that set of values.

Mrs Waites: That's it.

Mrs Fellows: You [teachers] can make them aware of the scientific, that's not the right word, social aspect. Then you're going back to, I'd like to teach my child values. I'd like them to be aware of things, but an, almost, starting point. And for us to say, "Yes, and that's what we think about it."

Mr Heymann went on to relate this discussion to his own religious beliefs:

Mr Heymann: We, as a religion, don't believe in sex before marriage. I say we don't believe, we know it goes on. (Laughter.) But that would be up to me to, kind of, instil that belief. And, obviously, they need to be aware that this isn't for everyone and we make that choice in a different way.

Parents' personal circumstances and the home lives of their children's friends, as well as a general awareness of the range of relationships their children were likely to encounter, led the groups to reflect on the topic of divorce and the potential benefits and pitfalls of addressing the subject.

Ms Franklin: *Do you think, on divorce, playing devil's advocate, by the fact of discussing it with the children, if they are in a really happy home, it might make them feel a bit vulnerable? So, I understand that when parents argue, or when they do this, or when they do these behaviours, that can cause them to fall out of love and become separated. They might worry about that a little bit.*

Mrs Friend: *They might do, because Alan worried about that. When Rihanna's parents split up he was coming home all the time asking and saying, and asking whether me and Ed were splitting up when we were arguing. And we'd go, "No, not at all." And he still, every now and again, we still have to put his mind at rest, because he says, "Rihanna doesn't see her daddy now. Is that what happens?" And it's like little things like that.*

TW: *So, in that case do you think it would be more important to teach about it?*

Mrs Friend: *Yes, definitely.*

TW: *Because, leaving it until Rihanna's mum and dad split up means that it's hard?*

Mrs Friend: *It's harder for them to cope with. Definitely, I think so, because he was very upset about that, because Rihanna was upset, so it concerned him a lot.*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the issues of homophobia and same-sex relationships arose side-by-side. While some parents were wary of this topic being covered in

class, others were keen for these relationships to be approached in the same way as any other. Some parents briefly mentioned children using or hearing homophobic abuse and the way they had dealt with it. For some also, this was a good reason for the word “gay” to be taught as part of SRE. It was when discussing these subjects that parents’ view of education as a tool for positive social change came through most clearly.

Ms Franklin: *I mean, playing a sort of devil’s advocate a little bit, do you want to sort of, is part of the purpose of education to try and remove any prejudice isn’t it, and negativity.*

Mrs Waites went on to equate racial prejudice with the use of homophobic language.

Mrs Waites: *But then that’s a way of turning it so that it’s not used as an insult. It’s like racism. It then goes in the whole racism and sexism thing.*

However, perhaps due to the age of their children and the broader topic of the discussion, they did not explore this problem in great detail. Rather, parents were much more focused on familial, loving relationships, most considering same-sex relationships an appropriate topic to address within this context at KS1. However, in one group there was some debate about whether children would have ‘the level of maturity to deal with it’ (Mr Ling). This debate occurred when parents were shown an array of ambiguous images depicting different types of families (Christopher Winter Project 2009). Mrs Ling noted that, ‘There isn’t a same-sex

one.’ Mrs Thomas pointed out to her group that homosexuality and same-sex relationships ‘are a very common thing now’ and explained that she had already been asked about these by her children. This led on to a brief, inconclusive, discussion, in which parents pondered over whether the topic should be addressed in Year 1 or Year 2, with parents seeming to favour the latter.

Mr Heyman expressed his perspective: ‘I mean, I’m not saying hide away from it, I’m just saying you don’t need to proactively bring it up,’ a viewpoint that was not directly contradicted by other members of the group at that time. However, through the focus group discussion Mr Heymann came to view lessons with this topic focus as an opportunity to address his values with his children.

Mr Heymann: *Because I came in to this today, as an example, I really would disagree with same-sex relationships being brought up. But from listening to everybody I can actually see it, hopefully, from your perspectives as well. And actually, thinking now, it wouldn’t necessarily be such a bad thing. . . . I can say, well, we believe something different from what you’ve been taught and just kind of clarify what your values are.*

For Mrs Paxton, there came no such change of viewpoint. The idea that her children would be introduced to the existence of homosexuality and same-sex partners was quite disturbing. When discussing the possibility of using stories to introduce sensitive subjects, she explained: ‘I would be totally offended by it. It’s up to people, if they want same-sex relationships, but I don’t want it thrown in my children’s faces through books and I would probably stop them reading them.’

Parents were often motivated by the need for children to understand what they saw on a day-to-day basis, with Mrs Winston wondering how she would address the possibility of 'walking down the street [with her children] . . . and seeing two women kissing'. What children might see on television was also given as a reason to address the subject of same-sex relationships. Contemplating a *Coronation Street* storyline that portrayed a lesbian couple, Ms Knight explained that her children 'hear a lot on the telly . . . So, I think, yes, in a school environment talking about things properly is a good thing.' What also became obvious was the extent to which children had already come across gay and lesbian couples among their families, friends and neighbours, and in one case had family members who had undergone gender reassignment.

Mrs Thomas: *I think it's important, because not teaching things like that [homosexuality and same-sex relationships] can cause discrimination. They'll think that it's not right. There are so many different types of families. And as I said, with their grandfather having a sex change, and his brother also having a sex change, it makes a whole new dynamic for our family. I mean, it's not wrong. And my boys, they know what 'gay' is. They know about girl-girl relationships, and boy-boy, and girl-boy. Sex changes, well we've been through all that. But again, we're very open about it. Not everyone's going to be. That's a minefield.*

Ms Knight: *I think as well, it's important for them to know while they're young because if you tell them something that's quite, I don't know how to broach that – they're going to be blasé about it. They're like that, aren't they, children. Whereas*

to them the same-sex relationship being taught, it's normal. --- I think it's the best way.

* * * * *

Mrs Winston: *The same-sex relationship one, that you see, my brother, his daughter is living with her mum who's a lesbian, so obviously she's got two females there. Miles, the older one, he's not particularly interested, but Matty's asking, "Why does she love a woman?" Because they're brought up to expect it to be a mum and a dad. I think society is changing so much, that there are a lot of same-sex relationships, and children, they are inquisitive; they are asking questions. So, I don't know, maybe teaching them sex education earlier on doesn't necessarily avoid tricky questions but maybe puts a bit of insight into their minds about it. Because that's just a personal one for me, that I've had to say, "Well, you know, some ladies do love ladies, and some men do love ladies." But my boy has said, "You love grandma." But I will say, "Not in that way. I'm not in love with grandma, whereas they're in love together."*

This discussion also led some parents to consider the role of children's narrative texts in portraying different types of relationships, and began to think about the pedagogical implications of addressing the subject.

Mrs Winston: *For me personally, yes. I think it's great. I mean, like I say, I don't want them to be graphic, but touch on a subject, making them aware that this is how things happen now. You know, 40, 50 years ago, you wouldn't have had*

same-sex, divorce you would have, it depends on your upbringing. I mean, I've been brought up to believe a husband and wife stay together forever, but that's not how it happens now.

In relation to the family, these parents felt that the core values to be explored were uncontroversial, with love, respect, honesty and responsibility coming to the fore. The parent participants spent a good deal of time developing and clarifying their own views about the inclusion of homosexuality and same-sex relationships in the curriculum. Ultimately, most arrived at the conclusion that children needed to understand the world around them and that an early introduction to a diverse range of lifestyles might ultimately lead to greater tolerance. At no point however, did a parent suggest that this diversity should be positively valued; rather they were keen that their children should be accepting and understanding of those relationships that they portrayed as straying from the heterosexual norm. None of the parents considered that by exploring diversity in sexuality and relationships that children might be learning about their own identities and partnerships.

5.5 Heteronormativity and gender stereotypes

Parents examined a picture sorting activity that was designed to challenge stereotypes (Christopher Winter 2009). This they regarded as uncontroversial at Years 1 and 2. However, at least one parent believed that there are some essential ways of being linked to the body, although these were ill-defined.

Mrs Waites: *I think relationships, I mean, relationships – they need to know how to deal with other people. How to form friendships. All that. Males and*

females: the differences. That women can, girls have their different ways. Boys have their different ways. And how to interact together as well, as they get older.

One group explored their own children's attitudes toward gender specific activities and their awareness of the consequences of stepping outside of gender-defined norms.

Ms Franklin: *Because I think Rosetta, who's in Year 2, would do the usual: "Well that would be a girl, but a boy could play with that too." Whereas Colin, who's obviously Reception, would go: "That's for boys", and he wouldn't, and he wouldn't . . . "No, only boys can play." I don't know if that's a typical boy thing or whether he'll change in two years.*

Mrs Thomas: *I think they will, because John and William say, because both of them play with dolls and stuff, and play with My Little Pony, and they've gotten teased and stuff. And both of them turn around and say, "Anyone can play with anything they want to." So ---//*

Mrs Winston: *Now Miles [oldest son in year 6], one of his favourite movies is Rapunzel, but he'll say to me – and it's a good film – he'll say to me, "Don't tell anyone, mummy."*

Ms Franklin: *Well, that's why it's called Tangled. For that reason: to attract the boys.*

Mrs Paxton: *Because Rapunzel's girly.*

Mrs Thomas: *Because Rapunzel's girly.*

Ms Franklin: *Yeah, that's why they do it.*

Ms Winston: *But he likes it. He really likes it.*

Mrs Thomas: *The boys watch all the Barbie shows. They've shown them on TV, all the things that Barbie's done. They watch them all the time.*

Mrs Winston: *The boys watch Tinkerbell and all of them. Because Matty, the younger one, has heard Miles say, "Don't tell anyone." I think it's stereotyped that it should only be girls that watch these. Which it shouldn't.*

Here Mrs Thomas recognised the dangers children potentially face when crossing gender boundaries in even the most unobtrusive of ways (Thorne 1993). When her sons played with "girls" toys they were subject to teasing and being subordinated as Other but, she claimed, determinedly resisted other children's policing of their activities. In this, those children who police the gender identities of others also reassert their own normative gender identities and reinforce a heterosexist gender binary (Butler 1990). It is clear that Matty and Miles had learnt the rules. They may have engaged in gender transgressive acts but knew to hide these away to protect themselves from facing censure and being identified as feminine.

Rapunzel, in the 2010 film *Tangled*, is part of Disney's stock of 'new princesses' (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 2011; Stover 2013; Wilde 2014). Unlike her earlier counterparts, she is an active *heroine* who takes control of her own destiny. However, just like those earlier princesses, Rapunzel's fate is to fall in love and marry the film's male lead: she still gets her traditional "happily ever after". Mrs Winston's sons were indeed breaking away, with her support, from stereotypical boys' entertainment, but they were still imbibing a normative heterosexual romantic storyline. She was also quick to point out that, 'He [Matty] wanted to be

like the hero.' In this way, Mrs Winston glossed over the gender non-conformity of her sons' viewing preferences that might have been viewed by some as an indicator of homosexuality (Martin 2009).

Mrs Winston was not outwardly inclined to interpret the boys' enjoyment of these films as a sign that they might be anything other than heterosexual. She was also safe in the knowledge that these films are reinforcing the hetero-romantic relationships that she desires for her children. She explained: 'In an ideal world, everyone wants there to be a mum and dad and two kids don't they, they don't particularly want it to be two ladies or two men, but it happens.' Although Mrs Winston used '*they*' in her statement, what she seems to be communicating is that she felt *everybody* wants this for their children, including herself. Similarly, Mrs Thomas' assertion again clearly privileged a particular form of heterosexual lifestyle: 'Because William is very technically minded. He wouldn't stop with, well after you're married, and you have a house, and a job, and a car – which, they've got this in a row. We will beat this into our sons!' It must be remembered that at this time same-sex marriage was still illegal; Mrs Thomas was, therefore, talking about heterosexual marriage. Both these mothers have family members who occupy LGBT+ identities. Consequently, it might be thought that they would be better prepared to embrace non-stereotypical behaviours. At least rhetorically, however, they appear to be raising their children in an environment driven by heteronormative values in a similar way to other parents in the focus groups.

Justifying her support for teaching about same-sex relationships, Mrs Fellowes, alone among the parents, acknowledged the possibility that some children might identify as anything other than heterosexual.

Mrs Fellowes: *Because I suppose, especially for them [children] who do feel that's them, they like girls or they like boys, I suppose they have to make it seem like it's not, it's normal. Because, obviously it can start from a very early age, when they think they're in the wrong body or that sort of thing. So, yes. Although, as you [Ms Knight] say, you've got to go about it sensitively. You need to think some people choose that sort of thing.*

Even here, Mrs Fellowes presents a confused picture. She has picked out one very specific possibility, that of gender dysphoria. She also mentions 'they like girls or they like boys' and seems to equate this with being 'in the wrong body', perhaps suggesting ideas about the relationship between the body, gender and sexuality that are still ultimately essentialist in nature. The explanation for divergence from stereotypical ways of doing gender and heterosexuality is rooted in an 'error' in the body. Presumably the way to fix the problem is to fix the body, thereby bringing the body, gender and sexuality into "natural" alignment. However, she then goes on to talk about choice. Throughout she appears to be distancing her own children from these possibilities.

The very absence of a meaningful conversation among these parents around the likelihood of any children, not only their own, being anything other than heterosexual is revealing. There is a "real" (heterosexual) way of doing girl and

doing boy, but these parents also identified times when their children transgressed normative gender identities. Yet, in their own lives, they have family members and close friends who identify as LGBT+, but it seems that heterosexuality (and for some a very particular lifestyle within that) is privileged and assumed for their children, while non-heterosexuality is still very much Other (Davies and Robinson 2010; Martin 2009). This is not to say that these parents have not considered the obvious possibility that their own children might identify as anything other than heterosexual, but the articulated assumptions of heterosexuality where parents are distancing themselves and their children from what they experience outside of their own narrow versions of family might indicate a certain level protectiveness of, or fear for, their children. There is also a possibility that parents were reluctant to openly consider their children's sexual identities because their parenting might be judged negatively by the other group members. There is also the risk that such a conversation might lead them to confront their own deeply held views about childhood innocence, as distancing their children within the discussion also serves to reinforce their perceived non-sexual natures (Davies and Robinson 2010; Martin 2009).

In the parents' conversations about gender and sexual identities, they were happy for their children to be taught that it is acceptable to stray from stereotypical images of girl and boy. However, they did not see this as an imperative that would empower their and other children to inhabit significantly more fluid gender or sexual identities. Nor did they identify opportunities to address girl / boy, male / female power imbalances. They also steadfastly portrayed their own children as

heterosexual and wanted their children to engage in lasting heterosexual relationships.

5.6 Biology

During the first round of focus groups, unprompted with a question or review of a lesson plan, one group of mothers was clear that they wanted their children to use the correct terminology for genitalia. They also showed an awareness that different families would use a variety of slang words and that their children would encounter a great variety of language in the playground and classroom.

Ms Knight: *I think they should be taught about the body and the correct terminology for things. But it's difficult, because they are going to hear slang terms for things. Like, Charlotte's got a children's dictionary and it's got the reproductive system in it, and her dad was sat there and she was saying, "What's that? What's a p-e-n-i-s?" And I said, "It's a penis." Her dad was like that (pulls a disapproving face). I said, "It's children's dictionary!" So, she was pointing them all out, and the words and everything. But then she may hear from friends, or --- because, parents, we all bring up our children differently, and some parents use different words for different things. So, it's difficult, what words they should be taught.*

Mrs Thomas: *Mine have some interesting words. But then they compare themselves, also. So, with having two boys, we've just always used terms; actually, I think we started with wee-wees. But I, I think having the proper terms would help, because I made the mistake of making up cute names. And I'll say, "That's a girl part; that's a boy part." And they'll look at me like: "Mummy, that's not what it is." So, yes that's not how it's used, and I have to back away. It's, I*

would have preferred if I'd started having taught them the proper terms for everything because it's quite embarrassing when they yell, "Momma, your bo-bo's showing!" People in the store --- And they're seven. Well, they're seven in January. I think technical terms work a lot better.

In terms of naming genitalia, parents often revealed that they had taught their children the correct terminology for these parts of their bodies, although they did not use these exclusively. Others had only used colloquial terms, but were happy to teach or have their children taught the correct words, and, like Mrs Thomas, some had wished they had taken this approach with their own children from the very beginning.

Ms Franklin: *Yes, I think they're not exactly, you know, the female and male body parts are not exactly nice names are they? But mine, my two, Colin and Rosetta have stood in the bath and Rosetta's gone, "This is a vagina," and William's gone, "This is a penis." And Rosetta's like, "Yes, look at mine", and Williams – and I'll say, "That's enough of that now." It's never mentioned again, they never use those words. But they know that's the name of it, and I can't even remember ever, when it was, at what point we told them that that was the names, it just kind of happens naturally, doesn't it?*

Some of the parents wanted to restrict anatomical naming to the penis and vagina. They felt more information would be too challenging or likely to lead to more questions that they did not want answered and recognised their children's own

curiosity. Responding to the content of the *All About Us* DVD (Channel 4 2006), only one parent, Mrs Paxton, was against the idea completely.

Mrs Winston: *Thinking about that [naming body parts], six-years is probably about the right time to start saying things, because I know that I'll be in the bath, and you can never have five minutes peace//*

Ms Franklin: *They're in there with you.*

Mrs Winston: *And then Matty will come in, and Miles [aged ten] knows, he knows so much. Matty won't come in, you'll find him kind of looking with his head to the side trying to see what's happening and why you haven't got this penis, "willy", as they know it. I mean, when he was younger, we always used to say it just dropped off. Tell him these silly stories. And then, as you get older, well, we actually said, "You play with it, it drops off." But that's another story. But I wouldn't like him saying that on the playground. Part of the truth would be good, because I don't want him talking to someone in Mr Hall's class and saying, "My mum's willy dropped off."*

Mrs Paxton: *I know you're right, I'm a bit more reserved and I don't want to tell them.*

Mrs Winston: *No, but when they're looking*

Mrs Winston: *I don't mind them knowing words like penis and vagina, but I don't know if I want words like clitoris, er, "It gets hard", and . . . it's too much for that age.*

Mrs Paxton: *I also think that when they talk about, "Mummy and daddy need these parts to create you", because at that age my children don't need to know that.*

Mrs Winston: *It's just going to open a can of worms. A lot of questions that --- but why do they need to know that?*

Later, having watched the DVD (Channel 4 2006) in the second session, which showed anatomically correct diagrams of male and female external and internal sex organs alongside a commentary that included an allusion to pleasure, the conversation once again turned to the question of protecting innocence and discouraging sexual experimentation. Indeed, as Mrs Winston's statement "You play with it, it drops off" demonstrates, in conversations with children at home there is, once more, a tendency to avoid providing correct information and an evasion of the subject of pleasure.

Mrs Winston: *I think they should stop before they open up the vagina and show the details.*

Ms Franklin: *It was at that point that you started to feel a bit uncomfortable.*

Mrs Winston: *And by all means use your cartoon characters. Say: "This is a vagina. This is a penis." But they don't need to know the rest.*

Mrs Thomas: *I agree with that.*

Ms Franklin: *Yeah. Leave the rest for when they're a little bit older. Perhaps I'm being old fashioned?*

Mrs Paxton: *No.*

Mrs Thomas: *But it doesn't need to. Up to that point. The boys have asked quite detailed. Oh, really! And William doesn't let anything go. We've had to go right up to the point of I'm not going there anymore.*

(Laughter)

Ms Franklin: *But you've got to be honest with them, haven't you?*

Mrs Paxton: *But it's putting those things into a child's mind at six-years old that doesn't need to be. You'd perhaps expect the parents to answer if they ask, but//*

Mrs Thomas: *I'm not sure I would have gone into the whole when it gets hard, or the clitoris. I wouldn't touch that with a ten-foot barge pole.*

Mrs Winston: *If they're talking about a penis going hard and it's quite pleasurable, or a clitoris going hard, in the long run is that going to be making them more sexually aware that they might want to try it?*

As the conversation continued, two of the mothers of boys talked about their own sons' gaining pleasure and being curious.

Mrs Winston: *. . . Having two boys, they find it exciting, very fun, erm //*

(Laughter)

But, erm //

Ms Franklin: *I just say, "Stop messing". It's like, well no. Just find an appropriate place to do it. And I get, "My willy's sticking up!" If it was me, I wouldn't want to say "This is the clitoris and this is the --- " You wouldn't want to do that would you?*

Rather than viewing the boys' behaviour as a real problem or a sign of inappropriate premature sexuality, the parents seemed to find the boys' curiosity and pleasure amusing. However, when it came to girls' sexuality and the thought of talking about the clitoris and pleasure this was a step too far; girls' pleasure was, in this way, glossed over and the discourse of girlhood innocence maintained.

By way of contrast, both a small group of mothers (Mrs Friend, Mrs Waites and Mrs Fellowes) and a group of parents that consisted of three fathers (Mr Heymann, Mr Ling and Mr Egan) and one mother (Mrs Ling) found no difficulty in accepting the full range of issues and information covered in the DVD, including the introduction of the clitoris and the notion of pleasure. While the mothers' group was initially surprised by some of the content, they found that within the context of the DVD the information given was appropriate.

Mrs Friend: *I was a bit shocked when they said about the clitoris and stuff, and that was quite shocking in a way, because I didn't expect it to be focused at Year 2. But then again, how they've spread it out, I think overall, it was okay.*

Mrs Waites: *Yes, and I think, because they've talked about it, and the way they've talked about it – that things are normal, and the differences are normal – it doesn't make it an issue.*

Mrs Fellowes: *It doesn't make it an issue.*

Mrs Waites: *It's natural, so it just makes it fine, and the kids will be just: "Oh, that's fine." Except it might lead to more questions.*

The fathers too saw the DVD as 'a reasonable way to introduce it' (Mr Heymann) and 'a gentle introduction' (Mr Ling). This group was also very relaxed with the fact that different classes might take the lesson in different directions and gain more information than others.

Mr Egan: *It's a good basic package, I mean, the discussion will bend and sway depending on the class won't it, and it may go little bit further with one class than another class, it just depends on the group.*

Nonetheless, while the fathers were clear that they did not want a class to engage in discussion of intercourse and conception, a mothers' group felt that, so long as the discussion was couched within the context of a loving relationship, teachers should respond to children's questions to avoid possible misconceptions. In fact, some of those present had already begun to talk about pregnancy and childbirth, largely in response to their children's questions.

Ms Kennedy: *I mean, I don't know about everyone else, but I know Jeremy has asked questions about how you make a baby, that sort of question. He's asked me, and I've been quite open about it. Not giving too much detail away, but I think it's important to know a little bit if they ask. And I think that's about a maturity.*

Ms Gage: *I agree. I agree with that.*

Ms Kennedy: *Lots of my friends are having babies. And we had a conversation about it the other day. And he said, and he overheard me saying she's planning on having a baby. And he said, "What do you mean she's planning on having a baby?" So, we had a little brief chat about that. And then he said, "Well how did it get there?" So, I said, typical teacher, "How do you think?" Interested in what he's say. And his answer was, "Well I think what happens is you eat lots of fruit and vegetables and you have lots of calcium, because babies need calcium and they need milk." And that was his kind of answer to it, so we talked. And said you need a man and a woman, so he knew that from somewhere. I don't know where he*

knew that from. And then he asked me a little bit. And I said, I told him a little bit about how a lady has eggs, and then he went, "Oh, okay thanks." And that was it. So, he obviously didn't want to know much more. It's just, as you say, that kind of maturity level. Whether they're ready to know, and you know your own children. But as a teacher, coming to me, that's quite hard to teach a class that when some of them aren't ready for it.

Parents throughout the study had noted the influence of the media and what children observed in the world around them in the need to develop children's 'true' understanding: to avoid the development of misconceptions and confusion (see Davies and Robinson 2010). This group of parents also acknowledged that their children would not only be receiving information about sex from trusted adults, but would likely be gathering knowledge from other children.

Mrs Waites: *I think it [children's questions] would need answering.*

Mrs Fellowes: *Otherwise they will make up their own ideas.*

Mrs Waites: *Or they will get it in the playground, and I think that's a lot worse. So if they do ask, then I think it needs answering. Again, you can do it in a scientific, simple way.*

* * * * *

Ms Franklin: *I think we're quite open in our house, and I think it's all age appropriate, and I think when it starts to get into difficulties sometimes, is when you've got older children isn't it, and you know, with him, he's only in Reception,*

he plays football in the park and he's playing with older kids and sometimes they're using foul language and they're saying things, and sometimes he will pick things up. He doesn't necessarily ask the question, but sometimes he will use terms and you're thinking, you don't know what the hell it means, you know. We won't necessarily always explain to him what that actual word means, because sometimes you don't want to do that do you, but yes, we try to be as open, but in a careful way. Like you say, sort of what you think is age appropriate isn't it?

Parents' general agreement that children should be taught the correct terminology for the vagina and penis was only undercut by Mrs Paxton. There was less of a consensus when it came to moving beyond this, to naming the clitoris, discussing notions of pleasure, conception and childbirth. However, the context of the *All About Us* DVD (Channel 4 2006) did have an impact on the way that parents viewed these more challenging aspects of SRE. This introduced parents to concepts that they had not previously considered would be topics for KS1 SRE and most were initially surprised by the DVD's content. Nonetheless, these parents were thoughtful when discussing these aspects of SRE and were open to more complex teaching of the biological aspects of the curriculum.

This is not to say there was total agreement among the participants and a gender divide did begin to emerge, with fathers tending to be more open to children being taught a wider range of anatomy, certainly within the context of the video. They were less comfortable with the subjects of conception and childbirth, however. For many of the mothers, it was the reverse: the teaching of anatomy could be restricted but conception and childbirth were less problematic. These parents

were still processing the implications of teaching these concepts and were often articulating their own uncertainty through the course of the focus groups, leading to no solid agreement, beyond the most basic naming of genitalia.

5.7 Parents' experience and confidence

In 2015, the findings of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal) revealed that of the 3,896 men and women between the ages of 16 and 24 surveyed from 2010 to 2012, only 7.1% of men and 14.1% of women reported that parents were the main source of 'information about sexual matters' (Natsal 2015 cited in Tanton *et al* 2015: 1). Examining these figures further, when asked if they received any information on sexual matters from parents, 19.8% of men and 42.7% of women claimed to have received information from their mothers and 17.6% of men and 6.9% women from their fathers. 'Among those who felt they ought to have known more, school was the most commonly-reported preferred source for both men and women (47.7%, no gender difference . . .), followed by mothers for women (40.0%) and fathers for men (22.7%)' (Natsal 2015 cited in Tanton *et al* 2015: 4). Despite these figures, the responsibility for SRE is commonly viewed as a partnership between schools and parents, with parents seen as having prime responsibility for their children's sexual socialisation. Hence, there is the longstanding right of parents to withdraw their children from SRE lessons and to be consulted on the form and content of their SRE programme in their children's schools (DfE 2000; DfE 2018a; DfE and Greening 2017; FPA 2011; Long 2015; NAHT 2013).

Even those parents who wish to claim the responsibility for their children's SRE sometimes do this on the basis that they can protect their children from too much knowledge and the influences of an overly-permissive society and education system (Christian Concern 2016; Christian Institute 2016; Paton 2015; Smith 2017). Other parents, who say they recognise the importance of SRE, are sometimes reluctant to fulfil the role of educator due to their own lack of confidence, knowledge or courage (Aldred and David 2007; Dyson and Smith 2012; Frankham 2006; Halstead and Reiss 2003; Milton 2002; Stone, Ingham and Gibbins 2013; Turnbull, van Wersch and van Schaik 2011; Walker 2004). Studies have shown that the unease or embarrassment that parents sometimes feel when considering providing SRE for their children is often rooted in their own experiences (or absence) of sex education, their dearth of knowledge, or lack of confidence in that knowledge (Aldred and David 2007; Davies and Robinson 2010; Dyson and Smith 2012; Frankham 2006; Halstead and Reiss 2003; Milton 2002; Feldman and Rosenthal 2000; Stone 2013; Turnbull 2012; Walker 2004; Walker and Milton 2006).

Milton (2002), for example, discussed sex education with mothers of Years 5 and 6 children (aged 10-12) from three schools in Sydney, Australia. These mothers frequently responded to queries from their children and sometimes initiated conversations about sexual matters. Some, however, were reluctant or uncomfortable talking with their children. This was particularly the case for those mothers who had not received sex education from their own parents, who 'wanted to talk to their children but didn't know how' (Milton 2002: n.p). Milton also found that, even among parents who were generally at ease talking to their children

about puberty, 'quite a few' found topics like sexual intercourse and paedophilia more challenging (Milton 2002: n.p.). All the mothers she spoke to were happy to hand over some responsibility for their children's sex and relationships education to schools, and this was particularly the case for those least comfortable with assuming this role themselves.

Ten years later, a similar picture emerged when Dyson and Smith (2012) examined parental attitudes to both home- and school-based SRE. They gathered data from four focus groups, comprising 31 parents (28 female and 3 male) with children in primary and secondary schools. Some of the parents who took part in these focus group interviews reported that as children they had received no or 'very limited' sex education, and some had negative experiences of SRE (Dyson and Smith 2012: 222). These parents acknowledged the impact of this on their ability and self-confidence in providing their own children with adequate sex education. Rather than speaking to their children openly, 'they would avoid the subject altogether and wait for children to ask' (Dyson and Smith 2012: 223). Those who felt their own sex education was deficient wanted their children's experiences to be better but were held back by their own perceived inadequacies and lack of formal training.

Similar patterns emerged among parents in this study. Most claimed they were happy to talk to their children openly about a range of sex-related issues, including body differences, same-sex relationships, and aspects of pregnancy and childbirth, but a significant minority did admit that they felt uncomfortable or embarrassed to do so. However, looking below the surface of the more confident

statements, there were important limitations on the information parents were willing to share, even when asked direct questions by their children. Furthermore, as with some of the participants in Davies and Robinsons' (2010) study, two of the mothers also spoke about their male partners being less open to their children being educated about sexual matters than they were themselves (Mrs Thomas and Ms Knight):

Mrs Thomas: *Some people are much more – like my husband. He's more rigid. He --- I have a cousin who's gay. The boys know all about that and sex changes already, because their grandfather's now a female. And that whole aspect of it, I've never hidden anything from the boys. I have no problem with it. But my husband comes unglued at the mere mention of it. So I think I'm very easy going about it, but my husband's not.*

Like those parents who participated in Milton's (2002) study, Ms Knight, who reported that she was generally very open with her children, had her own reservations about what she would discuss with her two daughters:

Ms Knight: *Do you mean, how do you teach your children? When they ask THE QUESTION, 'Where do babies come from?' As a mum, I just cannot get my head around explaining the act that you have to do to get that baby. But being taught in school, and the correct way. Then I'm happy for them to learn. Because they do need to learn where//*

Mrs Thomas discussed her efforts to deal with her sons' question of "Where do babies come from?" Alone among these parents, she initially appeared to have very few boundaries in terms of the questions to which she would honestly respond in the hope that her boys would be happy with the answers they received.

Mrs Thomas: *That's where we ran into problems, because William is very technically minded. . . . Because we've already had the conversation about what the parts are for. I mean, obviously breasts are for the baby to feed off, and that type of thing, and then in was about the other bits. And I explained that your mummy bits and your daddy bits go together, after all this you can create a baby. William didn't stop at this. John did, he just walked out of the room. But William, he kept going. So we had to talk about his special seed. The mummy's special egg, and where it was, and stored, and how it comes out. And at that point I was thinking I have no idea of what to say. That was when I had to stop. I said, "We'll have to discuss this when you're older."*

Mrs Fellowes: *You see yours are quite inquisitive. You see, mine are: "Too much information. I don't want to know mum." That's what I normally get about anything.*

Mrs Thomas: *You start with, "How does this do it?" and "How does this do it?" And it just snowballs from there. And you can't just say, "Well, you're too young to know about that" – when it doesn't go away. Like I got asked at the weekend, week after week until he was satisfied with the answer. And he had the understanding in his mind of how it worked.*

Mirroring the views of parents in previous studies (Advocates for Youth & SIECUS 1999 cited in Berne *et al* 2000; Milton 2004 cited in Walker and Milton 2006), those

who lacked confidence in their ability to communicate effectively with their children were relieved at the thought that someone who had trained to teach would be able to inform their children about sexual matters and to answer questions they did not feel well-equipped to answer. They were also keen to receive some instruction to help them support their children.

Miss Gage: *Well, I'll be honest I've never had a situation, a massive situation yet. And I'm dreading it. Because it will be me, not her father, that has to deal with it. And I don't know where to begin. I wouldn't know where to begin. Because, I'm like – you're so sweet and innocent.*

Mr Egan: *How were your parents with you?*

Miss Gage: *Believe it ---. The reason I'm here is because I was told nothing//*

Ms Kennedy: *I don't remember being told anything.*

Miss Gage: *Although, you know, when sex comes into it, I didn't have a child until I was 26, so that never affected me. But, I don't know. No, they never told me anything. Till I got to senior school I just listened to my friends, and whatever happened. They were completely closed off to me. That's why I'm here today, because I don't want that for my daughter.*

Mr Egan: *I think, like we said before, whatever programme is produced, if we could have some instructions//*

Miss Gage: *Or help.*

Mr Ling: *If something could go out to parents from day one.*

* * * * *

Mrs Friend: *I think I would prefer a teacher telling them because, I don't know, it's learning and the way the teachers probably put things better than how I would describe it. My six-year old has asked a few questions, but probably that's because he's friends with children that have got older siblings as well, so they do come up in conversation. When he comes home and asks us, I'm thinking, go and ask your dad, because I haven't got a clue, so I thought I would say something wrong.*

Parents throughout these focus groups recognised their own role in educating and their children about sex and relationship issues. However, like parents in previous studies, they often felt they lacked the knowledge and skills to act effectively, often due to their own experiences of SRE. This frequently them to place a strong emphasis on the role of teachers and schools in performing this function effectively.

5.8 A partnership approach and confidence in teachers

Like parents in Milton's (2002) study, these participants were keen for the school to establish information evenings so they would be both clear about what would be taught in school and prepared to answer further questions that children might have. Parents sometimes acknowledged that what their children would be taught in school might not fit with their own beliefs or value systems. They also felt that this was something that they as a family should be able to address, particularly if they had some understanding of what their children would be covering in school. Most expressed high degrees of confidence in their children's teachers and wanted to work in partnership with the school.

Mr Heymann: *I think, like we said before, whatever programme is produced, if we could have some instructions//*

Miss Gage: *Or help.*

Mrs Fellowes: *If something can go out to parents from day one//*

Mrs Waites: *And just like you do with maths and literacy evenings, to be sex and relationships. I mean, parents need to not be scared about coming in. Not label it sex and relationships evening.*

* * * * *

Mr Heymann: *If, from a religious point of view, if you were talking about same-sex relationships it wouldn't be a problem, because you're kind of addressing the issue up front. And then I can say, just as you would if you were studying different religions, or something. It would be exactly the same. I can say, "Well we believe something slightly different from what you've been taught", and just kind of clarify what your values are. It's probably a good opportunity to sit down and you've made the difficult or embarrassing approach really, and it's up to us. It's easier for us to say, "Well, actually I know what you've been talking about today. Have you got any questions about it?" It probably makes it easier for us then.*

When discussing where the use of the DVD (Channel 4 2006) might lead, the fathers were clear that they would not want the discussion to stray into the areas of intercourse and conception. Nonetheless, they were confident that teachers

would be best placed to decide how to deal with any “awkward” questions that might arise.

Mr Ling: *I suppose, as I said last time, if you wanted to go further into the mechanics of it, because there's always one, isn't there, who's going to be a bit more curious. Exactly how does that work? I don't think that's a conversation I'd want to have.*

Mr Heymann: *Well it opens it up, doesn't it? It's like it mentions it in there.*

Mr Ling: *There's got to be a male and female to make new life.*

Mr Egan: *And this is what the penis is used to, so it might bring that question up. I'm sure it will. How you address it is really up to you.*

Mr Heymann also felt that an approach where teachers were able to respond to children's questions in a well-informed and measured way would be useful in supporting parents. This could lay for the foundation for parents' discussions with their children:

Mr Heymann: *You know, they're going to ask questions about their brothers or sisters or whatever, and this will probably help parents to, you know, say you've got a uniformed answer really, and they're not embarrassed and it makes it easier for parents, I think.*

What was evident from these focus group interviews was that the majority of these parents had confidence in their children's teachers. As with any other subject, they trusted teachers' judgements and knowledge-base, and were happy that teachers

would be able to communicate information effectively. They also echoed the views of an Australian mother in Milton's study who expressed admiration for teachers stating that, 'I think it is wonderful how they stand up there and say this in front of the children' (Milton 2004 quoted in Walker and Milton 2006: 422). At the same time, they acknowledged that not all parents would feel the same way and that teachers are potentially in a precarious position when it comes to answering children's questions, especially those that were not planned for.

Mrs Thomas: *My boys [John and William] know way too much already. Yeah, I have to be honest, having someone give them ideas – proper ones rather than ones they come up with themselves – I don't have a problem with ---//*

Ms Knight: *Again, that's exactly how I feel. I think as long as it's not in too much detail. But then I think how they're going to be taught in school is going to be different than, I don't know. The correct way, or the way that teachers put it is going to be better. And rather than hear it from their friends, because there's going to be, going around with different friends. Well is that the right way, or is that how it's done, or is this how it's done? So I think being taught it correctly//*

Mrs Fellowes: *Yes, I agree with that.*

* * * * *

Ms Knight: *I think, to be honest, your children come to school every day and you respect that the teachers are going to teach them in the correct way. And they could come to school any day and ask you something.*

TW: *They could.*

Ms Knight: *And put you on the spot. And I think, as a parent, we're all there on those spots every day when the kids say something, so me, personally, I respect the teacher for that to just say what she thought was the right thing at that moment. And maybe discuss it with you after school. Or just say, "I said this," or "She said that." But, then again, every parent isn't going to have the same view.*

There was also a good deal of sympathy for teachers who, parents felt, would be in a difficult situation if children brought up topics or asked questions that were beyond the scope of the school's SRE plans. They considered ways in which teachers might be able to protect themselves from the ire of unhappy parents.

Mrs Thomas: *Everybody's going to make mistakes, but not all parents are forgiving. So, it's, really, in general you have to consult with the parents about what --- I think it should be told to the parents in some way, if only to cover the teacher and the school, really.*

Mrs Fellowes: *Yes, so it doesn't come back on you.*

Mrs Thomas: *Well this is it, because everything they teach can come back on them, so they've got to cover their bases on it. I would say, just to protect the school and the teacher it would have to be put into some kind of writing or told at the door, kind of thing.*

Clearly, these parents recognised the benefits of a "partnership" approach" to teaching their children, perhaps beyond the confines of SRE (Walker and Milton 2006: 423). Given their willingness to participate in this consultation this is perhaps unsurprising. They saw potential advantages in the school curriculum introducing

sensitive topics, providing information they did not feel equipped to impart and reinforcing messages and values they wanted to instil. Where the partnership potentially came adrift was when parents felt that the school would be encroaching on their own role, giving too much information or countering their own values. They could also see that, even if they had high levels of trust in their children's teachers and were willing to give them a good deal of latitude, other parents might disagree with what and how their children were taught within the context of SRE and might cause problems for the school or for individual members of staff.

5.9 Conclusion

The parents who took part in these focus group interviews volunteered to do so because they had an interest in the school's intention to review its policy on SRE and to introduce the subject at KS1. Beyond this their motivations varied: Mrs Paxton came adamant that she did not want the school to introduce her children to SRE and encroach on her role as a parent. Miss Gage, on the other hand, came to find out the school's intentions, but then wanted to work toward the development of the curriculum. Others, came to share their views and listen and, particularly in Mr Heymann's case, developed their own opinions through the discussion.

By the end of the process there was broad agreement that the school had a genuine role to play in SRE. The shape of the curriculum at KS1 that parents wanted remained in some ways unclear, but some basic agreement was arrived at. In these groups Mrs Paxton was an exception, but perhaps an exception that could be seen as representative of parents less open to the possibilities of SRE

for young children, particularly those whose objections are based on strongly held religious convictions. Parents wanted their children to learn about friendship as a starting point and to understand that some basic principles and values that serve as a foundation for a productive friendship apply equally to all positive relationships. Most parents were at least willing for their children to explore a range of different types of families and romantic / sexual relationships, some wanting their children to understand difference, others more proactively wishing this would counter prejudice. In terms of gender and sexual identity, parents seemed to assume that their own children were heterosexual. They were at ease with the idea that gender stereotypes might be challenged, and some recounted examples of when their own children did not fit the established mould.

Agreement about the biological aspects of SRE was fairly narrow: that children should be taught the correct terms for genitalia (specifically penis and vagina). Parents were unsure what should be covered beyond this baseline.

Much unease about curriculum content and pedagogy was related to a firmly held value of childhood innocence. This was a concept that parents held dear but struggled to define. It also led them to take positions that were contradictory and they wrestled with their own uncertainty. Similarly, parents' understanding of sex, gender and sexuality were firmly rooted in a heterosexist model.

What did emerge was a strong sense of confidence and trust that these parents had in their children's teachers and the school. While they were sometimes unclear about what children should be taught and the kinds of questions they were

happy for their children to have answered, they expressed faith in the expertise and judgement of their teachers. At the same time, they recognised the potential pitfalls of teaching SRE; they knew that teachers might 'make a mistake' and give children 'too much' information, and that some parents might react negatively to this. Nonetheless, they regarded SRE as an important part of the curriculum, saw the value of good communication between parents and teachers, and the benefits of some parents being allowed to remove their children from SRE to avoid conflict. They envisaged a productive parent-school partnership to the benefit of their own and other children.

Chapter 6: The world of the children

Children were proud of their girlfriend or boyfriend status and would take advantage of any opportunity to quietly share this information with adults and to fiercely challenge any of their peers who might try to question or undermine it:

Lisa was standing in the line for dinner with a group of children from my class. I began teasing the children in the queue that I was going to eat all the chips before they were served. Lisa's response was that she would "set Archie on me". She went on to confide quietly, "Archie's my boyfriend." One of the boys overheard this and exclaimed, "Yeah, but Archie likes Ella!" "But he's still my boyfriend," Lisa retorted.

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I draw upon Butler's (1990, 1993) conception of the heterosexual hegemony to interrogate how gendered and sexual identities are constructed by young children in the primary school. This approach assumes that gender and sexual identities are both relational and performatively constituted, in that they are not natural but appear so through repeated performance. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985; Connell 1995) has also proved useful here as a tool for understanding relationships between boys, as well as between girls and boys.

Following their own focus group research into Year 5 children's values and SRE, Halstead and Reiss (2003) justified the necessity of speaking to children before constructing a sex education curriculum. Although their central focus was upon the values that should be disseminated through SRE, much of what they argued also holds true for the knowledge and skills that might be taught. Similarly, Alldred and David's (2007) argument that children's lived experiences need to be the starting point for SRE and that they should be encouraged to think critically about gendered and sexual relations holds weight. Aside from the importance of showing children respect and giving them the right to be heard, talking to children is the one way to get a clear picture of what they want and need to learn about. Speaking with them is the only way we can really discover what they already know and understand.

With all the children's focus groups, I started with an analysis of the children's views and experiences of family. After this, although there were common threads running through each session, the children began to set the agenda to a greater degree. They responded to prompts and questions but took topics in different directions depending on their experiences and interests. The sections following that on family are, therefore, gathered from different sessions, at different points in interviews and combined with some of my own observations and experiences in an attempt to make a coherent whole.

The following two sections of this chapter, 6.2 and 6.3, provide a grounding for consideration of children's social lives and the ways in which they actively construct their gendered and sexual identities. Section 6.2 explores children's

complex experience and flexible construction of family and discusses some implications for practice in schools. In section 6.3, children's ideas about gender difference are examined, including their attachment to stereotypes and their attempts to reconcile their lived experiences with these. Section 6.4 discusses the importance of the playground and play as a social space where children are free to interact with a large number of others in a way that is relatively unregulated by adults. Children's conversations revealed the borderwork they undertake through games and ways they used this space to forge their gender identities. Finally, section 6.5 is dedicated to these children's "romantic" attachments. Within this I present two studies of a group of children's intense friendship and of a girlfriend-boyfriend relationship. Children's heavy investment in these relationships is explored, as are the status that come with being a boyfriend or girlfriend and the assumed heterosexual nature of children's romances.

What emerges throughout is children who have a strong attachment to normative heterosexuality, but who are thoughtful and recognise occasions when their underlying assumptions about the world are challenged by their own experiences.

6.2 What is a family?: Children's experiences and understandings

According to the DfEE's (2000: 11) *SRE Guidance*:

The Government recognises that there are strong and mutually supportive relationships outside marriage. Therefore, pupils should learn the significance of marriage and stable relationships as key building blocks of community and society. Teaching in this area

needs to be sensitive so as not to stigmatise children on the basis of their home circumstances.

However, as noted above, there is a strong heterosexist tone to the document, with heterosexual marriage assuming privileged status and families implicitly defined as being based around children. In later Draft RSE Guidance (DfE, 2018a) there is a firmer acknowledgement of different types of relationships and families and a clearer steer toward LGBT inclusivity. However, as the PSHE Association (2018) points out, the directive could still be stronger. This has led Stonewall to call for the final version of the guidance to:

- Require all primary schools to teach about LGBT families as part of teaching on ‘different families’
- Make it clear that all teaching of these subjects should be LGBT-inclusive, rather than simply ‘recommending’ that it should be, and make specific reference to schools’ duties under the Equality Act 2010 not to discriminate against LGBT pupils and families (Stonewall 2018: n.p).

Children’s experience of family and what that constitutes is significant as, like school, this is where they begin to construct their own gendered and sexual identities. From the perspective of creating a rounded and genuinely beneficial SRE curriculum, it is also important for educators to gain an understanding of what “family” means to the children they are teaching.

If teachers and children are to explore notions of kinship, questions of who is part of a family are important. The children in this study experienced family in a variety of structures, including absent fathers with whom they may or may not have had contact, parents with new partners, married parents with children sharing the same household, and unmarried cohabiting parents. Some had many siblings, while others had none.

O'Brien, Alldred and Jones' (1996) exploration of children's understanding of family and kinship demonstrated that the "ideal" of the nuclear family, with children and married parents, continued to hold a good deal of sway with children between the ages of seven and nine. However, perhaps as family units have become more diverse and complex, children's understanding and active construction of kinship / family has been shown to be increasingly flexible and inclusive (Nixon, Greene and Hogan 2006; Mason and Tipper 2006). Based upon the outcomes of interviews with children aged seven to twelve, Mason and Tipper (2006) reach a number of conclusions about the way children define their kinship groups. They identify a number of factors that are significant when 'reckoning' those they considered to be 'like family': relationships were characterised as 'close and caring'; individuals need to be 'close to a member of their "proper" kin', have 'regular contact' and children and parents need a 'shared biography' (2006: 16-17). If children are to learn about family relationships, these fluid accounts and understandings of kinship need to be accounted for in the construction of a curriculum.

At the beginning of the first round of focus group sessions each child was asked to draw and talk about the people in their families (as opposed to those they regarded as like family) (Appendices 12a–12o). Although the central aim of this was to garner information about how children saw their place within their families and how they viewed those around them, it was also a tool to enable them to “settle into” the focus group situation (Corsaro 2011, O’Brien, Alldred and Jones 1996, Halstead and Reiss 2003). As with the O’Brien, Alldred and Jones (1996) study, children talked as they drew, gave a commentary on the process and often stopped to ask for guidance about whom they should include. The response to these enquiries was always that they should include anyone they regarded as part of their family.

In a number of studies, children have included pets as part of their families (O’Brien, Alldred and David 1996; Morrow 1998; Mason and Tipper 2006). As can be seen from Elizabeth’s and Rosetta’s drawings below (Figs. 3 and 4), so too did children who took part in these focus group interviews. In fact, with the exception of Emily, children with pets included them in their pictures, these animals possibly fulfilling Mason and Tipper’s (2006) criteria for “like family’ kin’.

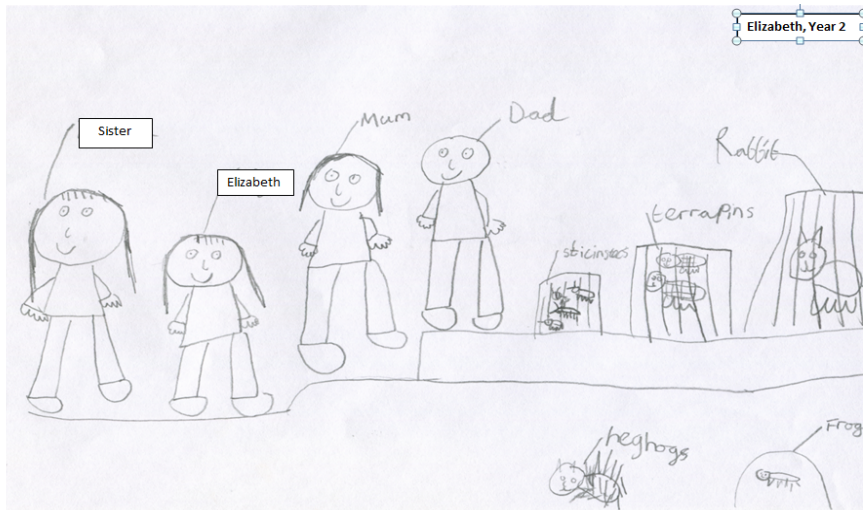


Fig.3

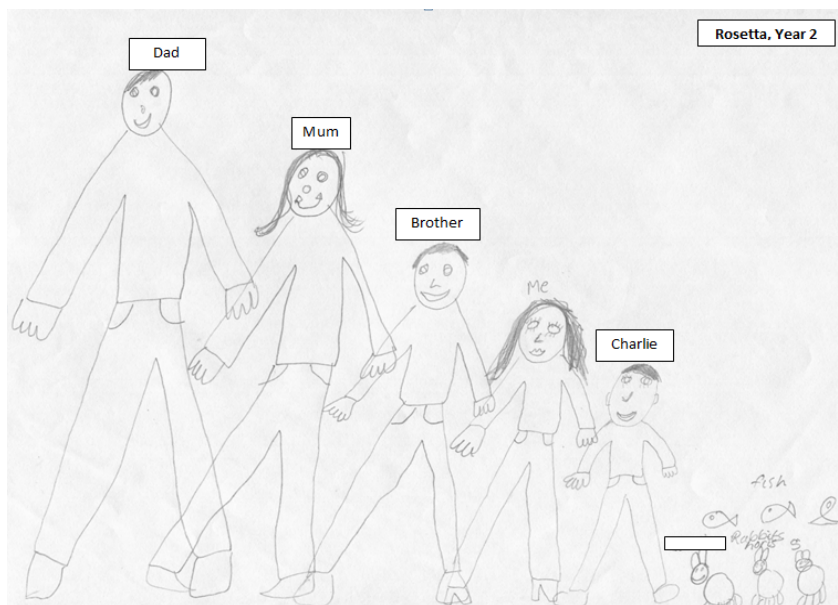


Fig.4

Some children drew only the members of their immediate family. For these children those (people and animals) who lived in their household was the most important criterion (O'Brien, Alldred and David 1996). For example, Eliza's drawing shows both of her parents, her brother and herself (see Fig.5). Others depicted more complex and unconventional images of family life. Jeremy, for

example, drew not only his mother and her partner (with whom he lived), but his father who he saw on alternate weekends, a cousin, his childminder and her son (his best friend) (see Fig. 6). Jeremy's childminder was clearly an important and regular presence in his life. She had looked after him since before he started school and picked him up after school each day. Jeremy's cousin, Alice, was also an important constant as, when his father took him for the weekend, he would play with her at his paternal grandparents' house. Interestingly, however, Jeremy's father's parents did not feature in his picture or the discussion of his family. Not all individuals that an "outsider" adult might consider to be part of a family, even using Mason and Tipper's (2006) criteria, matched the family members that some of these children drew.

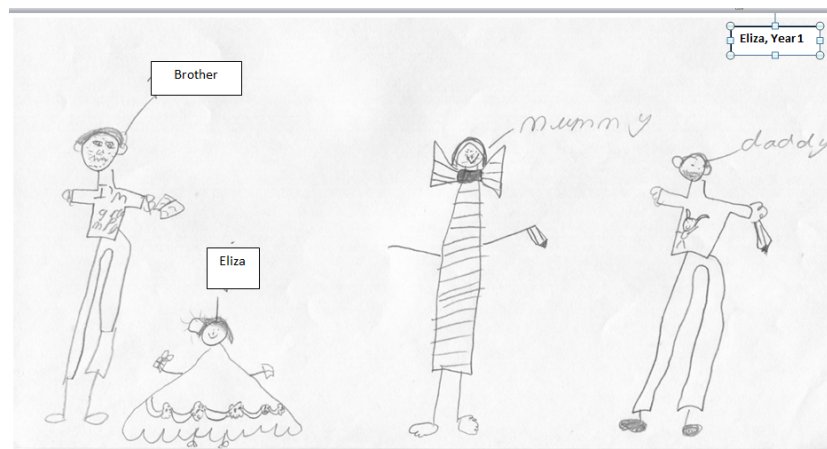


Fig. 5

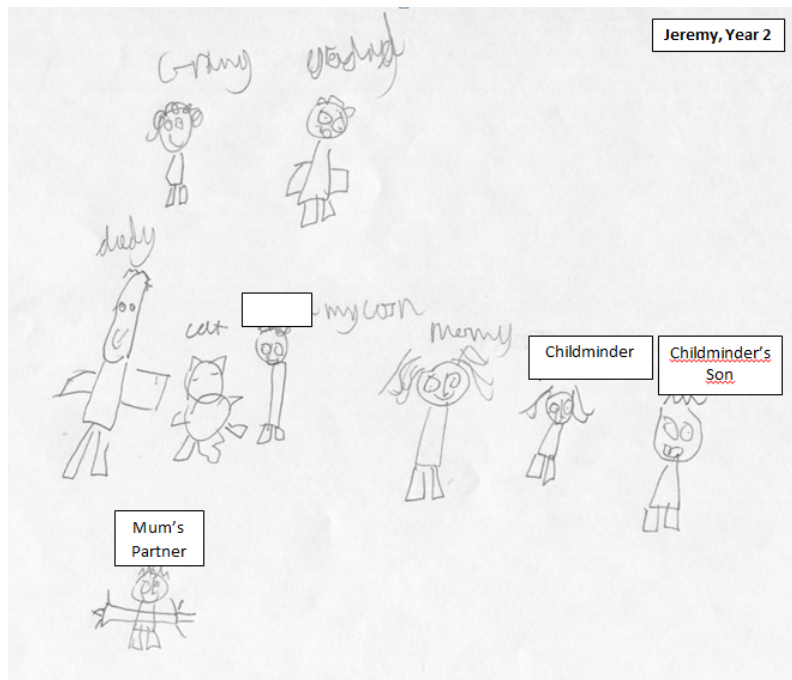


Fig. 6

Unlike the children in O'Brien, Alldred and Jones' (1996: 96) study, who only drew people who 'had a consanguineal, affinal or adoptive relationship' with them, Alan (an only child) included his friends Rachel and Vicki and their parents, along with his own mother and father (Fig.7). The two families lived in the same street and often socialised together, and Alan clearly valued their relationship. In his picture, he also included his pets and his grandparents, whom he saw on a fairly regular basis. Their shared biographies and constant presence seemed important to Alan's ideas about who made up his family.



Fig. 7

Finally, the presence of deceased relatives was quite common (see Fig. 8 and Fig. 9). Some were great grandparents whom the children had never met, while others had recently passed away.

Nick: *Well, my great granddad, when he was in the look-after-place where he got looked after, me and mummy went to, brought him biscuits. Because he told us what he liked and took them to him. And we use to see him a lot, but now he's died.*

* * * * *

John: *This is my great grandfather.*

TW: *And where does your great grandfather live?*

William: *We don't know 'cause we've never seen him.*

John: *No. He's, erm, he's in heaven now.*

William: *We haven't got to seen him, 'cause when we got here he died.*

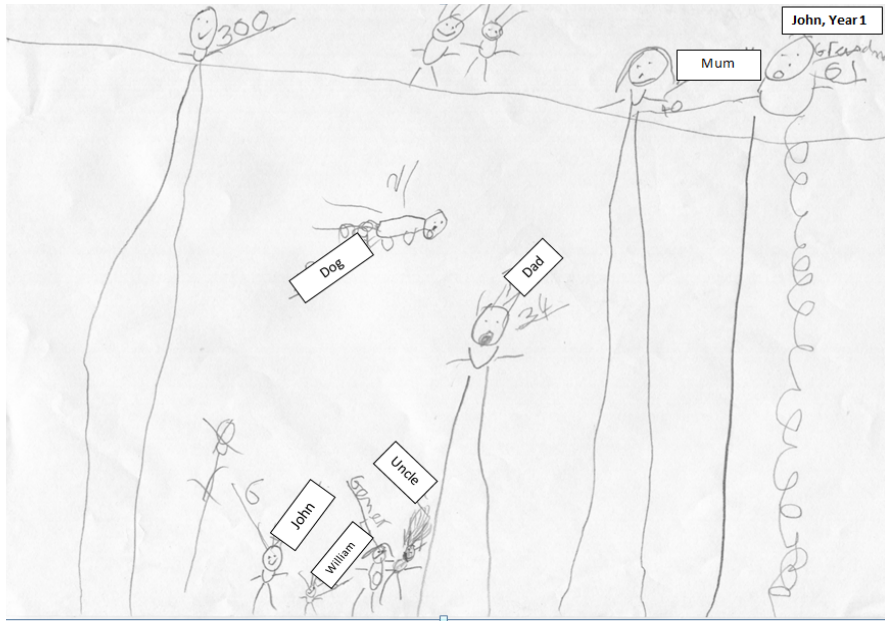


Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Perhaps the intensity of recent interactions, in Nick's case, accounts for the inclusion of his great grandfather. John's inclusion of relatives who were both deceased and whom he had never met was more of a puzzle. However, much of John's family lived overseas and perhaps the physical absence of these living

people meant that the dead were as real as the living to John, especially if they were the subject of frequent discussions in his household.

Clearly, this is only a small sample of children's family profiles representing their own perceptions of kinship. Nonetheless, the make-up of each of these families was unique and few conformed to commonly held notions of traditional family units, the kind promoted in political rhetoric by those for whom the main focus is on stable families with married, heterosexual parents. What this demonstrates is that if educators are to examine families and relationships in SRE (or any other lesson) they need to be very aware of the vast range of family-types as perceived by children rather than just focusing on genealogy and legally defined relationships. It is also important to understand that children's feelings about their own family structures need to be dealt with sensitively, for while none of the children expressed worries or concerns about their own families during focus group sessions, comments from Charlotte's mother illuminate a desire on behalf of her children to conform to long-established familial patterns. Charlotte's parents were long term cohabiting partners with two daughters who, Charlotte's mother explained, frequently asked when their parents were going to get married.

Mrs Knight: *But, at the moment with mine, it's just if you love somebody you don't necessarily have to be married, because me and their dad aren't married, but we've been together for 18 years, since we were at school. So, because they often say to me, "Are you and daddy going to get married?" I say, "I don't know, maybe one day." But you don't have to be married to love somebody.*

The children also showed an awareness of the changes in others' families but appeared to be non-judgemental about these.

Mick: *Like Rihanna. She, she had a dad, but her mum had a boyfriend and her mum is getting, got married now, I think. And ---//*

TW: *She's going to get married, isn't she?*

Mick: *Yes, because Rhianna's mum and dad split up so they're going to get married again.*

Here it is clear that children's experience of family is varied, complicated and not always easy. To have a "one-size-fits-all" version of the family in teaching is to ignore, exclude and diminish the value of all sorts of family types. The values of one family compared to another are likely to be at best different from, and at worst at odds with those of other families whose children are in the same class; teachers need to reflect upon this (as do those policy makers who formulate curriculum guidance) when designing schemes of work. Furthermore, the failure to explicitly require lessons about families to reflect LGBT+ families is both exclusionary of some children's current experiences of family and limits the articulated possibilities for children's identities and future partnerships.

6.3 What's a girl? What's a boy?: How children identify and negotiate gender difference

When children talk about the differences between boys and girls, how they define what is a girl or a boy, what emerges is an awareness and assimilation of common stereotypes alongside a knowledge that their own experiences do not necessarily

tally with these stereotypes. While at times the children tried to devalue their own experiences with explanations and qualifications, at other times they merely shrugged-off these conflicts as immaterial to their own lives and understanding of the world.

Most of the girls in the study had taken on many of the traits of 'girly girls'; wearing pink, glitter and flowers in their hair; they enjoyed 'pamper parties' and engaged in 'girly' play. However, their appropriation of these cultural tropes was neither constant nor unquestioning; nor had they assumed a hypersexualised version of this identity. During a discussion about Sophie's pamper party it became clear that the girls enjoyed the process of making themselves 'girly' but did not want the boys following a similar path. Sophie explained why she had chosen to have a pamper party for her seventh birthday:

Sophie: *Well, I like getting, like, make-up, and I love getting my hair done, and my nails done. So that's why I chose it.*

The other girls were quick to agree that they enjoyed these processes and having foot massages. When asked if boys could join in the girls were amused and initially giggled at the idea that boys might want to have their hair and nails done, but they agreed that if boys did go to a pamper party they would be allowed to have a foot massage. Rihanna recalled that she had been to a party where the boys were allowed tattoos and the girls nail varnish and that her four-year old brother, Seth, had asked for nail varnish to be applied. While the response of the girls in the focus group was to laugh at the idea of Seth having his nails varnished, what

emerged from Rhianna's brief recount is a reluctance on the part of the adults present at the party to go along with Seth's request. While Seth was engaging in some gender transgressive behaviour, the adults were taking the opportunity to reinforce normative gender boundaries.

Rihanna: *Well, I did go to this party where we had tattoos. That was Christopher's party. Girls could get their nails done, and then the boys could have tattoos. But girls can have tattoos if they want.*

TW: *Did boys get their nails done if they wanted?*

Children: *Giggles.*

TW: *No?*

Sophie: *That's what I got done at my pamper party. Well, not at my pamper party, my friend's.*

TW: *Those nails that you've got now? The sparkly ones?*

Sophie: *Yeah.*

TW: *Why can't boys have their nails done, Rhianna?*

Rihanna: *Because they said the boys are allowed boy dinosaur tattoos. The girls are allowed dinosaurs.*

TW: *Wouldn't they let them? Even if the boys wanted to would they not let them?*

Rihanna: *Well, Seth said, "I want my nails done!"*

Children: *Giggles.*

TW: *And what did they say then?*

Rihanna: *Well, they said, "Okay, you can have some sparkles."*

Children: *Giggles.*

TW: *Right. So they let him have some sparkles, did they?*

Children: *Giggles.*

TW: *Did he like that?*

Rihanna: *Well, they didn't actually. They just put some little dashing sparkles, but it wasn't actually nail varnish.*

Later, in one of the Year 2 mixed groups, Rosetta explained that her five-year-old brother, Charlie, had also asked her to paint his nails.

Rosetta: *My brother . . . my little brother, told me to paint his nails pink. And I did it. And, erm, and it was really weird.*

Children: *Giggles.*

TW: *It was weird. Why was it weird?*

Rosetta: *He told me to paint them pink.*

TW: *You're giggling. Why are you giggling?*

Mick: *(Laughing) Boys are allowed nail varnish on. Mr Hall did.*

Charlotte: *Boys don't wear nail varnish and girls do.*

TW: *Is it ok for them to wear nail varnish if they want to though?*

Children: *Yeah.*

Mick: *They can have blue, but not pink.*

Children: *Giggles*

TW: *Okay, Rosetta.*

Rosetta: *He did it because his friend Adam, in his class – his dad, he's not his real dad, and he said his real dad's in the army. And I thought it was weird. And he said Adam's proper dad was in the army and his other dad paints his nails, and then Adam does it, and Charlie just copies.*

TW: *What do you think about that Alan?*

Alan: *It's silly.*

TW: *It's silly. Why do you think that Alan?*

Alan: *Because boys don't wear nail varnish.*

Mick: *I don't know why they don't.*

TW: *You don't know why they don't.*

Fred: *Some do.*

TW: *Some do, don't they Fred?*

Fred: *Mr Hall did.*

TW: *Mr Hall did. And Mr Marshal did. [To celebrate the Queen's Jubilee the two teachers had painted their nails red, white and blue.]*

Fred: *They normally just wear black and not pink.*

The idea of boys wearing nail varnish, especially pink nail varnish, was unheard of and amusing to most of the children. Yet, they then began to question this, with Mick's reflections that boys could wear blue nail varnish and he did not know why nail varnish was for girls but not boys. The children then began to dig deeper, identifying that sometimes boys and men do wear nail varnish, including their own male teachers. They managed to identify rules: no pink nail varnish for boys and men, but perhaps "masculine" colours (blue and black) are acceptable.

Meanwhile, the boys who participated in the study described the types of parties they preferred. The Year 1s explained that they enjoyed parties at a local leisure centre, which were based around sporting activities and video games (Matty, John, William). The Year 2 boys expressed a preference for bowling (when they

could stay up late), roller skating and visits to the pub or cinema (Fred, Bobby, Nick).

The children were clearly trying to make sense of what the rules are for male and female activities and adornment. While doing so they actively reconstructed these rules to maintain clear masculine and feminine boundaries that chimed with their own life experiences.

Bobby: *Well. Once, when I was on holiday. And it was a bank holiday, I went to Benidorm. I went with my friends called Helen, and Kirsty and Tom, and we didn't. And my brother. And all of the kids didn't know if he was a girl or a boy dressed up as a girl. So, me and Kirsty just went up to the person. And we said, "Hi" to her and she said, "Hi" back. And then I shouted, "She's a girl! She's a girl!" when I went back.*

TW: *How did you know she was a girl when she said, "Hi" back?*

Bobby: *Because she was speaking softly to me. And it was really funny, 'cause I was right next to her.*

When asked to explain how they knew if someone was a girl or a boy, the children initially gave well-worn answers, but each time they did so as a group they would start to deconstruct the assertion based upon their own experiences. For example, Rhianna began by saying that boys like to play football, while girls do not. This then provoked others to reel out a list of those girls in school who enjoyed and were proficient at football, and some of the boys protested that they did not enjoy playing football. Likewise, when it was suggested that boys 'fight a lot' (Bobby) or

that girls are 'shyer than boys' (Rosetta), wear lipstick and have long hair (Alan), there began a debate about these as signifiers of gender. After some discussion, the Year 2 group containing Mick, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Rosetta and Fred decided that there were too many exceptions to their ideas about girls and boys. In the face of so many contradictions they decided to abandon gender stereotypes and concluded that: 'They can all do the same things.'

Only in the Year 1 group was there a discussion of biological factors, largely couched in terms of underwear.

Eliza: *They don't grow stuff on their body.*

TW: *They don't grow stuff on their body, like what?*

(Eliza indicates breasts and laughs.)

TW: *Oh. I see.*

Eliza: *Boys don't do that.*

Matty: *Bras.*

TW: *Bras. Thank you, Matty.*

Eliza: *And they've got different pants.*

Children: *Giggles*

Eliza: *Sometimes boys have boxer boys' things.*

The Year 2s stuck to appearance, clothing, activities and aptitudes in their discussion. However, when I asked how one group of Year 2s knew the difference between girls and boys, Nick whispered, 'I know, but I don't want to tell you.' Although Charlotte replied, 'I don't think I'll laugh if Nick tells', he decided he

wanted to tell me 'later on.' Nick's right to decide what he spoke about and when he decided to speak was respected and during the focus group session the subject was left there. This does, however, probably indicate that these children knew that the basis of difference is located in the body and that discussion of these differences is a matter for a private rather than public space.

Neither the girls nor the boys rejected the idea of girls who did not fit the 'girly' mould. The girls were actively engaged in (per)forming their identities and employed various modes of doing girl depending on the situation in which they found themselves. For example, Polly was not a girly-girl, but was a footballer admired by both the girls and boys for her skills on the field. Despite her footballing prowess, however, it would be unlikely for her to be described as a tomboy. She was an intelligent, pretty girl with long blond hair who employed a variety of girl subjectivities depending on the situation. She was also the focus of Bobby's, and other boys' romantic interests.

Bobby: *I want to be Polly's boyfriend, but Howard is Polly's boyfriend.*

None of the boys in the study could be thought of as 'little toughs' (Jordan 1995), 'cool guys' (Connell 1989) or Connolly's 'streetwise' 'bad boys' (1995), although groups of boys who conformed to many of the traits outlined by these authors were identifiable within KS1 at BCP. These boys did, however, represent a range of masculine identities. Mick, for example, was well liked by his peers and never short of friends to play with (both male and female). He lived with his parents on one of the newer "executive homes" estates with his stay-at-home mum, computer

programmer dad and younger sister. Mick was an intelligent, articulate boy who, unlike the boys described by Paley (1984), who would abandon teacher-initiated tasks at the first opportunity, enjoyed sharing with the class extra work he had completed at home or the details of educational excursions with his parents. Despite having a profile in some ways akin to Connell's (1989) secondary-aged 'swots', Mick was one of a small, socially privileged, group of boys who, despite their friendships with girls, high academic achievements and lack of interest in playground football, were still liked and respected by the rest of the boys in the year group. However, Mick did have a long-term girlfriend, played football for the school team, and, although a hard worker, would vocally complain when completing any academic task, traits that seemed to insulate him from censure and guarantee his popularity among the girls and the boys.

Bobby was also a high attaining and articulate boy but was frequently in trouble for his behaviour both in and out of class, characteristics that Jordan (1995: 79) refers to as a 'touchstone for masculinity'. Unlike Mick, Bobby straddled two camps. Despite his claims to the contrary, rather than sticking with the "smart boys" he tended to gravitate towards groups of boys who would engage in rough play and fighting, whom he described as 'naughty boys'. At other times, he joined other children in mixed-gender play, expressed admiration for some of the girls and worked well in the classroom. Nonetheless, teachers often complained that he was disruptive in class and he had been known to abuse other boys by calling them 'gay' and on at least one occasion he had called Polly a 'lesbian' (see above).

As noted above, William certainly failed to conform to any of the dominant models of masculinity within the year groups. In addition to his love of *My Little Pony*, he would cry when confronted with a task he did not wish to perform, found sports challenging and unappealing, and would often spontaneously hug the girls in his class and his teachers. Despite his behaviour, the other children seemed to tolerate, although perhaps not embrace William if he joined their games. McGuffey and Rich (1999) similarly describe seven-year old Joseph. They explain that they had not observed Joseph's peers calling him names and assume that this is because his age means that he still has 'the luxury of displaying behaviours (e.g. crying) that are discredited in subsequent stages of middle childhood' (McGuffey and Rich 1999: 618).

Perhaps the profile of the boys in this study meant they were more thoughtful and less strident about the features of boys and girls than might have been the case if boys who conformed to the 'little toughs' profile had predominated in the focus groups (Connolly 1995).

When children's experiences failed to match their understanding of the world, they went to great lengths to overcome their confusions and to create a situation that made sense within their understanding of the rules of gender identity. Eliza was tackling an issue that she clearly accepted on the one hand but struggled to with in terms of the language she used. When the Year 1 children discussed physical traits that defined men and women the question of hair arose, with an initial assertion (from Eliza) that boys have short hair and girls have long hair. This claim

was quickly broken down, both by the other children in Eliza's group and by Eliza herself who then went on to discuss her grandfather's male partner.

Eliza: *My granddad's friend has a hair bobble in and her hair's long. They live in Spain, and she has a hair bobble in. Robin.*

TW: *Robin. She has it in.*

Eliza: *It's a boy.*

TW: *I know who you're talking about Eliza. Is that granddad's friend?*

Eliza: *Yes. He lives with her.*

Children: (Giggles)

TW: *So Robin has a hair bobble in? That sounds pretty.*

Eliza: *Sometimes.*

As can be seen from the use of pronouns here, Eliza was trying to interpret commonly held male / female signifiers (*she* has a hair bobble and *her* hair's long), and her grandfather's relationship with a man rather than a woman. Consequently, she had difficulty categorising Robin as either male or female. Eliza's mother, Judith Brown, confirmed her confusion over Robin, who she described as 'very feminine': 'Eliza who's saying to my dad, "What time's she coming home?" And I'm like, "Eliza, Robin's a man." Then she had to ask, "Are you sure that lady's a man?"' Clearly Eliza was aware of his masculinity ('It's a boy.') but she demonstrated her uncertainty when she fluctuated between referring to Robin as 'he' or 'she'.

In discussions concerning academic proficiency the children were adamant that there was no difference between girls and boys:

Jeremy: *'Cause Colin's good at writing, and counting and Karen is good at writing.*

Mick: *I'm good at maths. Sophie's good at maths.*

This then led the children on to a discussion about the roles of adult men and women. The children asserted that men and women can do the same jobs. However, this came with certain caveats including the idea that women could take on 'men's' jobs, rather than the idea that occupations lacked a gender assignment. Also, in no instance did the children talk about men in the same way. It was very much the case that in some instances women could "step up" into the men's arena, which they seemed to regard as more prestigious and challenging.

Mick: *'Cause boys do fighting, and then boys can go in the army when they grow up.*

TW: *Can't girls do that?*

Sophie: *They can if they want.*

Mick: *They can. Well in World War I they did.*

Bobby: *Yeah. Because in this movie called Battle of Los Angeles, there's these robots that army people defeat. And there was girl in the back garden. And the girl just shot the robot, and it landed in the swimming pool. And the robot just came right at her, and she had to get her rocket launcher and blow his head off.*

TW: *Oh dear. What about Sophie? Sophie's had her hand up for a while.*

Sophie: *My cousin, he's in the Royal Navy and he has a girl in his team.*

TW: *Do you think that's a good job for a girl.*

Sophie: Well, they might get hurt badly. Boy don't, boys are a bit braver than girls though.

Mick: The girls can have jobs in the Royal Navy.

Bobby: Yeah, like _____.

Mick: Yeah. 'Cause they can drive the ships or something.

TW: So if the girls are in the Royal Navy are they allowed to do the same jobs as the boys in the Royal Navy?

Children: No.

TW: Because?

Sophie: They might get hurt, or they might do something wrong that the boys //

Bobby: The girls are usually the medic.

TW: What do you think about that Holly?

Rhianna: I think girls can do the same job only if the captain says.

TW: Only if the captain says?

Rhianna: Yes.

Jeremy: Well, they might have to swap a girl in to do it.

TW: So can girls only do it if the boys aren't there to do it.

Jeremy, Bobby, Mick: Yeah

Mick: 'Cause they always say girls aren't as strong as boys, so //

Jeremy: So that's///

Mick: So that means driving, doing operating, not using guns and stuff.

Bobby: Yeah, girls are better at driving than boys. Because mostly girls drive. Mostly see girls driving in cars. Not boys.

TW: Ellie?

Sophie: *I know why girls are better than boys for driving. Because sometimes boys like to speed, and girls just don't speed.*

The children were very vocal on the roles women could take in what they saw as masculine professions, the circumstances under which they could perform those roles, and what they saw as the hindrances to their success. They did not, however, attempt to insert men into occupations traditionally viewed as women's work. It is therefore unclear whether they regarded these types of roles as unsuitable for men, or if they felt that it was obvious that men are able to pursue any career path they choose and so there is no point in having a discussion about it.

When asked about their own future career choices, only Eliza expressed a desire to have the same job as her father, but *both* of her parents were teachers. In fact, three of the children wanted to become teachers (Mick, Jeremy and Eliza), the same as their mothers, and Rhianna talked about her long term wish to become a doctor, which was related to her mother training to become a midwife. Aside from this, three of the girls wanted to be hairdressers (either because they enjoyed having their hair done or because they knew someone who was a hairdresser), Charlotte wanted to be a vet and Rosetta a gymnast, in contrast to the boys who wanted to work for the police, become builders, footballers and, in Matty's, case become a vicar (but only if 'building' did not work out).

It is striking that while these groups of children asserted that girls and boys, women and men, are equally capable and can choose their own career paths, they chose

not to break with gender prescribed roles in their future career aspirations. Granted, some of the career choices were slightly unusual, but none would raise an eyebrow among the bulk of traditionalists.

6.4 Policing the playground

An awareness of family structure and how this feeds into children's understanding of relationships and the constructions of gender identity are significant in the formulation of an effective SRE curriculum. However, children not only experience relationships within their families, nor is it the only site where children's gender and sexual identities are constituted. School is an important arena for children to develop their identities and to perform different versions of masculinity or femininity depending on the immediate context. Indeed, in my experience, parents often comment that their child behaves completely differently at home than school: perhaps at school they are quiet, compliant and passive, while at home they are energetic, difficult to manage and defiant (or vice versa). Little wonder then that children actively construct and perform, both in the classroom and on the playground or sports field, identities that sometimes lack apparent consistency.

Within the school, the playground is a particularly important site for children to develop perform and construct their gendered and sexual identities. As Thorne explains (1993:27) playgrounds are 'set up to maximise the surveillance of students,' but they are also a site where many children gather together in a relatively undirected manner and are most likely to be able to select their playmates and games with a relative degree of freedom. This was particularly the

case at BCP during the short morning and afternoon breaks when four classes of children would occupy the playground but with only one teacher on duty.

In all but one school where I have previously worked there has been a significant area of the playground that has been dominated by football, that one exception being a school where balls were banned. In one school, as in Epstein *et al*'s (2001) study of Bellevue Primary School, a large part of the playground was cordoned off with a 'cage' where football could be played. Year groups were allowed to use this on a rota-basis, ensuring the game did not take over the whole space. However, unlike Bellevue where Fridays were allocated to girls of all year groups, in this instance only boys ever entered the cage. Even in the absence of a ball, a game would often break out with boys using toys, stones or pieces of wood in its place. Although there was no cage, BCP was no exception to this pattern, with a painted football pitch occupying about a third of the playground. Despite this, and the fact that only a small proportion of the boys (no girls) usually participated, the game would often spread out to other parts of the playground with non-footballers unwillingly caught up in chases and tackles. The tendency of the game to engulf the playground and the conflicts that often emerged as a result of "fouls" meant that teachers, and more particularly the dinner supervisors who regularly complained about the boys' behaviour, often had little patience with players. However, no real moves were made to protect the playground from being overrun with footballers.

As in many schools, the footballers occupied a space in the playground disproportionate to their numbers (Clark and Peachter 2007a, 2007b; Epstein *et*

al 2001; Holly 1985; Renold 1997). Clark and Paechter (2007), in their study of Year 5 and 6 children's engagement with playground football, describe how girls would sometimes complain about the space taken up by the footballers and, in some instances, invade the pitch to disrupt games. Those girls who did attempt to join in would often be effectively barred from doing so because boys refused to treat them as proper players.

At BCP, non-footballing children stayed off the pitch and any stray footballs and players were given a wide berth. In fact, the area of the playground where a physical power struggle was most likely to occur was on the bars, where only two children at a time could play and the refusal to take turns often led to arguments and pushing, usually among the girls, and calls for the teacher on duty to intervene. However, the *de facto* zoning of the playground did mean that girls and the many non-footballing bystanders were effectively excluded from a large area of physical space. Thus, the footballers exerted a territorial control over the playground that far outweighed their number.

None of the children in the focus groups identified themselves as break-time footballers, even though a number of them attended after-school and weekend football clubs. Some of the boys even played for the school team along with the break-time footballers and, as with the boys in Connolly's (1998) study of boys in an inner-city primary school, had their successes celebrated in assemblies in front of the whole school. These children did not complain about the amount of football played at break-times and the way it encroached upon their own games. Rather they seemed to accept the situation and settled for using the rest of the playground

space for their games. They did, however, associate fighting with playground footballers. It was not football that they tried to avoid but footballers, whatever their game.

Bobby: *And some boys. Well a lot of boys, in my class//*

Jeremy: *Play football.*

Bobby: *In my class, fight a lot.*

TW: *And the girls don't?*

Bobby: *Yeah. 'Cause there's two really naughty boys: Zach and Paddy. They usually like to fight.*

Mick: *I never fight, 'cause I don't think it's nice. 'Cause everyone gets hurt. But I did play this one game, but it didn't, it was like a police game. And we had the police who were the good guys, and we had gangsters that we had to catch. Were you playing once Bobby?*

Jeremy: *I was.*

Bobby: *Yes. I was a gangster. No, I was a police, wasn't I?*

Mick: *Yeah. I was a police as well. Then we had lots of. We had Howard, Leon//*

TW: *Sophie said she was a robber.*

Mick: *Yeah, but, then it was a really hot day. And Colin quit because it was a really hot day. And he got hurt by Howard in the game.*

Bobby: *Howard was a gangster.*

Mick: *Then it became worse, didn't it Bobby. Where Steven changed the rules and started to, killing everyone. And started fighting.*

Bobby: *And started dragging everyone on the grass. And started hitting people.*

TW: *But the girls and boys were all playing together?*

Mick: *Yeah. And I said. And I trusted them. I said, “Can I trust you won’t fight?” And they said, “Yes.” And, erm, ‘cause it became really hot. And I was, like, I still want to play. And then they started getting guns out and killing everyone. And then they started punching people, didn’t they? And then, like, me, Rihanna, Bobby and Jeremy and Sophie started quitting and walking off.*

Jeremy: *Yeah, I didn’t even say, “quit”. I just walked off.*

Sophie: *And we just played a game all together.*

Mick: *Well didn’t you and me and Colin and Rosetta and Nick and Rhianna go and sit under the shade and do absolutely nothing?*

Jeremy: *Oh. I did that as well.*

Mick: *Yeah. We just sat there talking.*

Jeremy: *Yeah. We just sat there talking.*

Mick: *While we watched them punching and dragging and everything.*

The fighting boys maintained their hold over the playground through football and aggressive play. By occupying the physical space, they dominated those boys who occupied non-hegemonic forms of masculinity and the girls. They also restricted the options for those who did not join in their rough play: Mick and his friends resorted to doing ‘absolutely nothing’ on this occasion.

It is interesting that Bobby sought to distance himself from the ‘naughty boys’ in his class; he could often be observed playing and fighting with them. Despite Bobby’s obvious reframing of his position, none of the other children chose to challenge his initial depiction of his relationship to the fighters. Possibly, he was very aware of the context of the discussion and that I, as a teacher, might

disapprove of his involvement with this group of boys. It might also be the case that in this context he saw no need to align himself with the naughty boys and their behaviours; after all these were rejected by the other children in this discussion.

Bobby's friendship with the footballers was potentially important, however. He was the son of one of the teachers and performed well in academic work. As Renold (2001: 372) points out, boys who appear to be hardworking and compliant are often subject 'to verbal abuse and ridicule, and are positioned daily as 'swots', 'geeks', 'nerds' and 'squares' (2001: 372). However, Bobby managed to occupy a dominant position among the children in Year 2. In a similar manner to 12-13 year old high attaining pupils examined by Francis, Skelton and Read (2010), Bobby protected his position in a number of ways. He was very sociable and often off task in the classroom, which meant he drew the attention of his teachers and other children. As noted by his mother, Mrs Old, he sometimes used misogynistic and homophobic language to assert himself. He also frequently joined the playground footballers. Francis, Skelton and Read argue that children like Bobby are 'engaged in constant and perhaps arduous identity work' (2010: 335). They give the appearance of 'effortless' achievement, they disrupt lessons but at a fairly low level and associate with those children who are likely to find themselves in more serious trouble for their poor academic performance and challenging behaviour. They walk a fine line to avoid being marginalised or tormented by other children, evade serious school censure and still do well academically while making it seem that they do not have to work for their achievements.

Studies of children's play have repeatedly shown that they have a tendency to play in single-sex groupings (Clark and Paechter 2007; Epstein *et al* 2001; Jordan 1995; Martin *et al* 1999; McGuffey and Rich 1999; Paley 1984; Renold 1997; Thorne 1983). The children in this study could often be seen playing in groups of boys and girls, girls only and boys only groups, but almost all the children expressed a preference for playing with their own gender (the exceptions being Rihanna, Alan, Nick and Mick). The reason they gave for this was most often related to girls' and boys' play preferences; as Martin *et al* (1999: 755) point out, these perceived preferences then 'influence . . . playmate choices'.

Eliza: *It doesn't matter, but I'd rather play with girls.*

TW: *You'd rather play with girls. So why is that? That you'd rather play with girls?*

Eliza: *Because I'm a girl and they play more girly games.*

TW: *They play more girly games, like what games do they play?*

Eliza: *They play princesses. Like Disney ones or made up ones.*

TW: *And you like playing princesses.*

Eliza: *Yes. And they play --- fairies.*

Only Matty and Christopher from Year 1 were initially adamant that they did not want to play with girls. Although Matty's mother had spoken about his determination to keep his love of *Tangled* (2010) a secret, at no time was there any suggestion that either feared censure if they were to choose to play in mixed-gender groupings (Martin *et al* 1999). In fact, at other points in the interviews, both Matty and Christopher went on to list girls with whom they enjoyed playing. Their reasoning seemed to be that they enjoyed the activities they associated with

single-gender play. Matty explained, 'I like playing with boys 'cause I'm a boy . . . I like playing boys' games', and Christopher added that this was because 'They [boys] play good games'. In each group the children decided that some games were more suitable for boys, some for girls and some appropriate for both.

Mick: *'Cause we are, 'cause we play some games different. 'Cause we play fighting. But girls, but girls do like Barbie princesses and stuff. But then there's in the middle' There's, like, babies and tag and all that kind of stuff.*

Ultimately the groups all agreed that any game was open to and could be enjoyed by both girls and boys.

Some games, particularly fantasy role-play games, often had elaborate "rules" or conventions that prescribed the roles of both girls and boys. Some children indicated that fantasy games like "fairies and princesses" (Emily) and "babies" (Charlotte) were exclusively girls' games, even though a number of the boys said they liked to play babies with the girls. When this happened, they explained, the boys were usually the babies with the girls taking the nurturing roles of mother, sister or grandmother. The exception to this was Alan, who explained that he liked to play the role of 'funny grandma'. Alan seemed to manage this role by drawing upon his classroom position as "joker"; his grandma was always played for comedy, thus insulating him from being positioned as feminine and losing his boy status.

One popular fantasy role-play game on the playground was “ice monsters.” At first, the Year 1 boys explained that ice monsters was an exclusively boys’ game. This was the case until Eliza, one of the most popular Year 1 girls, pointed out that the girls would also play ice monsters but that when they did so the game was called “princess ice monsters”. There then followed a discussion of how the game was played when both girls and boys were involved:

Eliza: *Because I’m the princess.*

John: *Aaron’s the ice monster.*

Eliza: *And he wants the princess.*

TW: *Who’s the ice monster?*

Eliza: *Aaron. And he wants the princess, he tries to freeze me. If he touches me he freezes me and I die. So ---//*

John: *And I have to be a king.*

TW: *You’re a king?*

Eliza: *And the king has got to bring a guard and they help me.*

John: *Yeah.*

TW: *And are you always the princess, Eliza?*

Eliza: *Yes.*

TW: *And is that your favourite?*

John: *Or if there’s another girl//*

Eliza: *Yes. Because there’s no other girls there.*

John: *There can be two kings.*

TW: *Two kings.*

John: *Or maybe three, actually.*

Eliza: *There can't be a queen, can there?*

John: *Yeah.*

TW: *Why can't there be a queen, Eliza?*

Eliza: *Because we don't know what a queen could do.*

TW: *Okay//*

Eliza: *Because I think it's a bit dangerous for the ice monster with a queen.*

TW: *You think it would be too dangerous for the ice monster with a queen?*

Eliza: *Yes. The ice monster might get the queen.*

TW: *You think the ice monster might get the queen? But not the king?*

Eliza: *No, because he's a grow- up man.*

TW: *He's a grown-up man. But isn't the queen a grown-up?*

EG: *Yes, but he's a man. He's better at --- he's braver, and he's better at fighting.*

Here masculine / feminine boundaries were clearly policed. A girl, or girls, could take part, but had to remain relatively passive, usually waiting to be rescued, whereas all the boys in the game took a “warrior” role at some level, be they kings, soldiers or the ice monster (see Jordan 1995). While William was open to the possibility of more than one girl taking part in the game, for Eliza, in particular, it also seemed important that she was the only *significant* girl in the game.

John was willing to accept the presence of other girls as part of the game ('If there's another girl'), but Eliza cut him off with her determined statement: 'Because no other girls are there'. Eliza's effective barring of other girls from the game and positioning herself as “princess” put her at the very centre of what was, fundamentally, the boys' game. Rather than supporting the inclusion of other girls,

Eliza's exclusionary discourse served a number of possible functions. As in Hey's (1997) study of girls' friendship groups, the ability to include or exclude other girls, to control access to the game, afforded Eliza some power among her girl friends. This might mean that Eliza positioned herself as masculine, but this seems not to be the case. Indeed, in this instance, she conforms more closely to Connell's (1987, 1995) concept of emphasised femininity than Paechter's (2018) hegemonic femininity. Within the game's narrative she is positioned as powerless, the focus of the male gaze. She needs a male 'guard to help her' and will die if touched by the male ice monster. She is an aspirational figure for other girls but at the same time reaffirms traditional gender power relations.

Caitlin Ryan's (2016) ethnographic study focused on heterosexuality in elementary schools. In this she identified that heteronormativity was reinforced in two ways: '(1) the explicit disparaging of queer-inclusive sexualities and (2) the consistent positioning of straight heterosexualities as common sense, which implicitly silences other perspectives' (Ryan 2016: 78). In their social interactions, children would angrily distance themselves from homosexuality and same-sex relationships and located other children as gay or lesbian in order to dominate them. At other times in children's social interactions, for example in play and collaborative classroom activities, they would enact and write about heterosexual romantic relationships and families in a way that excluded the possibility of alternative gender and sexual identities.

In the children's focus group discussions, there was no suggestion of the denigration of LGBT+ identities among KS1 children at BCP. This is perhaps

unsurprising, as they were unlikely to admit to engaging in such behaviour in front of a teacher, or to being subjected to these kinds of attacks in front of other children. Nonetheless, there was a recognition of this type of behaviour in the teachers' and parents' groups. However, the children's fantasy and family-based role-play games were all scripted, by the absence of an alternative, to exclude the possibility of anything but heteronormative identities. There was no need for most children to actively voice homophobia in these situations to ensure that heterosexuality was reinscribed through play to the potential detriment of LGBT+ identities.

As well as rejecting the playground footballers for their rough play and fighting, these children were at least tolerant of those who transgressed some of the more prevalent gender norms of the playground. Both Jeremy in Year 2 and William in Year 1 failed to fit into dominant groups either in the classroom or on the playground. Neither of these boys were footballers, on the playground or elsewhere. Jeremy could often be seen playing at the periphery of the playground with a small group of girls. However, sometimes the girls cast him out of their group due to his insistence on touching and hugging them, and his occasional offensive comments. For example, on one occasion a group of girls were upset by him telling one of their group that he would take her into the bushes and take her clothes off. This type of behaviour might well be regarded as an attempt to reaffirm his masculine identity.

Primary school boys' sexually harassing behaviours have been explored by a number of authors, sometimes identifying the important intersection of gender,

ethnicity, class and masculine status (Connolly 1995; Skelton 2001; Renold 2005). Renold (2005), for example, suggests that for the KS2 boys in her study there were dangers in associating themselves with girls as this could lead them to be positioned as feminine. Even though 'being a boyfriend' could enhance boys' masculine status, this denigration often occurred when boys were making their first forays into the world of heterosexual romantic relationships, or when there was an absence of other boys in the group who had already started 'going out' (Renold 2005: 121). These boys sometimes engaged in misogynistic behaviour in order to reassert their masculine status among their male peers and exert their dominance over girls, thereby reinforcing gendered power relations.

At BCP the dynamics of gender relations were slightly different. The boys who took part in this study never expressed any worries about the consequences of playing with girls. Perhaps their age was a factor here. Possibly, also, they were insulated from being positioned as feminine because the mixed-gender groups they played in were either numerically dominated by boys or consisted of a small number of boys coming together with a small number of girls: there was safety in numbers. The potential threat in Jeremy's case was that he was a lone boy playing with a small group of girls and at the margins of the boys' play. This might have caused him to act aggressively in order to set him apart from the girls and to reinforce his masculine identity.

Like Jeremy, William was often at the periphery, and could be observed playing or bickering with his brother or attempting to join groups of girls. On one occasion William brought his favourite *My Little Pony* (bright pink with a purple, sparkly

mane) to school to show to the rest of the class. Unlike Jeremy, however, he did not seem to harass the girls or make misogynistic comments. William did not replicate dominant gender norms and could be seen as something of a 'gender misfit' (Renold 2002: 426), which might have laid him open to being positioned as feminine or gay.

Despite troubling the dominant performances of masculinity within their classes, during the focus group meetings neither of these boys expressed any difficulties with forming friendships or joining the more popular children in play. However, William's mother had stated that her sons were teased in school for playing with 'girls' toys'. There were some indications that their gender performances did result in other children, at the very least, distancing themselves from the boys. For example, some comments made by Jeremy indicated that he felt the need to surreptitiously insert himself into games ('I do that all the time. I sneak in, and they don't realise.'), to insist that he had been present when an incident had occurred, when others claimed he had not, and discursively to place himself squarely in the same group as the other children who took part in the focus groups. It would, after all, be uncomfortable to admit publicly that other children did not actively want to play with him. It seems that, while these boys were rarely sought out by others as playmates they did not often suffer outright rejection either. This might well be because they chose to attach themselves to other children who were unlikely to resist their presence. It is difficult to imagine anything but a negative outcome if they had tried to insert themselves into the playground footballers' games.

The children's choice of playmates at first seemed fairly clear-cut. Boys generally expressed a preference for playing with boys, and girls with girls, but under the surface of what children were saying the picture was far more complex. Choice of playmates was dependent on a whole range of factors, and sometimes was not really a choice at all. During focus group interviews, for example, the children referred to the availability of games and who was playing them, acceptance by other children, and the proximity and availability of friends. The role of parents in the selection of friends was also significant. Furthermore, not all friendships were the same, not all fulfilled the same function, and not all friendships were equally valued.

Alan and Bobby claimed to prefer playing with boys, but both chose girls as their "best friends". Bobby's best friends, Helen and Kirsty, went to BCP but were in Year 4, so were not able to play with him at break-times (the school had separate KS1 and KS2 playgrounds). Alan's friends (Rachel and Vicki) were also in Year 2, and he was so attached to them that they were included in his family drawing, yet they too were not break-time playmates. None of these girls were part of the study so it was impossible to know how they would have characterised their relationships. The friendships that the two boys described were, in fact, based upon a combination of proximity (the girls lived close by) and upon their parents' friendships. Paechter and Clark (2016) describe how girls from opposing groups in the primary school they attended were out-of-school playmates. Lucy, a 'nice girl', and Chelsea, a 'cool girl', would go cycling together at the weekends. This was, however, a friendship of convenience since they were the only KS2 girls in the neighbourhood allowed out without adult supervision. In school, they reverted

to their combative group roles. However, unlike the girls in Paechter and Clark's (2016) study of girls' friendship groups, Alan's affection for Vicki and Rachel and Bobby's for Helen and Kirsty was constructed as genuine.

Rachel and Vicki lived across the road from Alan and the children spent time at each other's houses, sometimes playing independently, sometimes spending time with their parents. Bobby's and his friends' parents were so close that the families would even spend holidays together and the children were regular visitors to each others' homes. Although the girls were very much out-of-school playmates, there was no disavowal of the friendships in school. The boys were very happy to talk to and about the girls, often sharing tales of their weekend exploits during "show and tell" time.

While parents can promote friendships, they might also inhibit or curtail them altogether, as Jeremy explained:

Jeremy: *Yeah, but I don't go out. My mum won't let me. I ask her if I can maybe go and see, do you know Kylie in your old class? She lives on my estate.*

TW: *Kylie and her brother Jack, is that who you mean?*

Jeremy: *Yeah. And they always go past my house, and I ask my mum if I can, if I could go out. And she says, "No, it's too dangerous."*

Jeremy's mother may not have allowed him to play out with Kylie and Jack because she felt that the area was too dangerous for him to be out on the street, or perhaps she felt these children were unsuitable friends. The actual reason is

irrelevant in the sense that whatever the motivation, it resulted in Jeremy's mother rather than Jeremy himself controlling his friendships and the space in which he played (see Furedi 2002; Pain 2006). Once he was out of the school gates she decided with whom he could spend time.

In July 2013, Katie Hopkins, former contestant on *The Apprentice* and newspaper columnist, appeared on the television programme, *This Morning*, to talk about the ways in which she regulated her own children's friendships. The views expressed by Hopkins were attacked by presenter Holly Willoughby and Hopkin's fellow interviewee author Anna May Mangan as 'terrible', extraordinary' and 'sneering'. Hopkins explained that when she thinks about her children's classmates: 'A name, for me, is a short cut. It's a very efficient way of working out what class that child comes from: do I want my children to play with them.' She went on: 'I tend to think children that have intelligent names tend to have fairly intelligent parents; and they make much better playmates, therefore, for my children.' Her argument was that assumptions could be made about the suitability of children to be friends with her own offspring based solely on names for these could be taken as an indicator of family values including the likelihood of children completing homework on time or being punctual at school. Hopkins claimed that such attitudes were not uncommon among the parents to whom she had spoken.

Although this may be seen as an extreme, irrational or offensive notion to many (91% of viewers who responded to a *This Morning* poll on the subject disagreed with Hopkins), children's social lives outside of school are frequently regulated by their parents (Battersby 2013: n.p.). Indeed, on a number of occasions I have been

asked by parents to prevent their child playing or sitting with another girl or boy for a variety of reasons, including that they felt the other child would get their daughter or son into trouble, that the parents were engaged in some kind of a feud or that the other child would upset their offspring in some way. In general, however, it is likely that school is the one place where many children are free to choose their own companions.

Children who took part in the focus groups often spoke of two distinct groups of friends: one group that they played with at school, another outside. An exception to this was a group of girls made up of Charlotte, Sophie, Karen and Rosetta. Rosetta's mother would often pick up some or all these girls to have tea, play and have occasional sleepovers. They could often be seen playing together in the playground and they would regularly interact with the group of "smart boys" that featured Mick and Colin. Other children would drift in and out of these two groups, but at the core were these six Year 2 children who had been in the same class since nursery.

This small group of children would chase each other around the playground. However, this was not usually 'boys-chase-girls/ girls-chase-the-boys' games; they were not setting themselves up as 'separate and opposing' groups, as described by Thorne (1993). These children chasing games were of tag and duck duck goose. This is not to say that girls versus boys games of chase did not take place on the playground, nor that these children did not take part.

There clearly was a gender divide in the group. As noted above, the girls would play together out of school, often facilitated by their parents, and sometimes leave the boys to go and play on the bars. Likewise, the boys would sometimes abandon the girls in favour of joining other boys in, for example, fantasy role-play games. Rather, it was the case that when this small group came together the nature of their play was not obviously divided along the lines of gender in the same way as described by Thorne (1993). They would often also play cooperatively. For example, following one PSHE lessons which focused on ways to relax, members of this group of girls and boys were observed administering massages to each other in turn on the playground. When these children came together, the borderwork took place through talk rather than action. It was the subject of girlfriends and boyfriends, who “liked” whom, that would lead to teasing and, sometimes, brief fallings-out.

6.5 Building a heterosexual identity: girlfriends and boyfriends

In contrast to the Year 2 boys in Skelton’s (2001a) examination of masculinity in primary schools, these children made a clear distinction between friends who were girls or boys and girl / boyfriends. Like the children in Renold’s (2005) exploration of KS2 children’s gender and sexuality, it was extremely unusual for those who considered themselves “going out” to meet out of school. The playground was the social site where they conducted their relationships, and even there it would be easy for casual onlookers to overlook these.

Some of the children talked about having or wanting girl / boyfriends and what this meant to them. These relationships were always firmly located within a

heterosexist narrative. Early in the conversation Matty, one of the two boys who had stated he did not want to play with girls, had indicated that he had multiple girlfriends. We returned to this subject later in the discussion:

TW: *Tell me about your girlfriends Matty.*

Matty: *My two ones are Mellie and Ava.*

TW: *So are they your girlfriends or friends that are girls?*

Matty: *Girlfriends.*

TW: *So how do we know they're your girlfriends – what makes them different from friends that are girls?*

Matty: *Erm.*

Eliza: *You kiss them.*

TW: *You kiss them? Have you kissed Mellie and Ava?*

Matty: *I haven't kissed Mellie yet, but I have kissed Ava. And I want to kiss Nicole.*

TW: *You want to kiss Nicole as well, do you?*

Matty: *I have once kissed Nicole.*

TW: *And what did Nicole think about that?*

Matty: *Because Alfie begged and all that stuff.*

TW: *What did Alfie do?*

Matty: *Alfie was begging us to, so we just done it.*

TW: *So you just did it because he kept begging.*

What about the rest of you? Eliza?

Eliza: *Kyle kissed me once.*

TW: *Who?*

Eliza: *Kyle Foster kissed me once.*

TW: *Did he? And what did you think about that?*

Eliza: *???*

TW: *He's your boyfriend is he – Kyle Foster?*

Eliza: *Yes. Like Travis and Paddy.*

TW: *Like Travis and Paddy. And have they tried to kiss you as well?*

Eliza: *???*

TW: *So what do you think about having a boyfriend Erin?*

Eliza: *I don't think . . . Well, I want to keep it private, like just acting like we're friends, but we're not. We're boyfriend and girlfriend. 'Cause I don't want people thinking we're girlfriend and boyfriend, 'cause I just don't like it – then they'll tell everyone.*

TW: *Would you be embarrassed?*

Eliza: *Yes.*

TW: *Why would you be embarrassed?*

Eliza: *Because.*

TW: *Is it just because it's private?*

Eliza: *Because we're in love.*

Despite Eliza's assertion of embarrassment, these children might be viewed as early entrants to what Kehily (2002: 66) has described as a '*sexual economy* where features such as physical attractiveness, desirability and status are commodified and played out in rituals of dating and dumping'. Alfie's role here ('begging' Matty and Nicole to kiss) is also important as a facilitator of other children's romantic interactions. Alfie's reported actions allow Matty to inhabit an aspect of hegemonic masculinity in which he is simultaneously positioned as

desirable, or “boyfriend material”, while also distancing himself from a position of desperation. Furthermore, he only kissed Nicole because his same-sex friend begged him, allowing him to reap benefits of privileging same-sex friendships over girlfriends, while publicly affirming his heterosexual identity.

For Matty, positioning himself as boyfriend while simultaneously rhetorically rejecting girls as playmates potentially insulated him from marginalisation and gender-based bullying. In a similar way to boys in Renold’s (2004) research focused on Year 6 children, these utterances and actions enabled him to eschew some of the most obvious characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. Matty only infrequently joined games of playground football, was hardworking and stuck to school rules, all of which might have made him an easy target for dominant boys (particularly if they had known about his enjoyment of girls’ entertainment). Unlike the boys described by Renold, it was not the case that Matty was ‘doing Other’, which Renold defines as ‘ways in which ‘hegemonic boys’ could engage with or try on Other non-hegemonic masculinities without penalty’ (Renold 2004: 253). In Matty’s case it seemed that most of the time he could do boy in such a way as to avoid the attention of those who might take exception to his non-hegemonic performances by straying into hegemonic boy territory. As such, Matty’s ways of doing boy did not present a threat to the gender and sexual relations experienced by the children who took part in this study.

For these Year 1 children, having or desiring multiple partners was unproblematic and although girlfriend-boyfriend relationships were generally described in terms of what the children would do together (play, kiss, go on holiday, eat out) both girls

and boys also talked in terms of friendship and romance. Like Eliza, Bobby in Year 2 described his desire for a girlfriend in romantic terms.

Bobby: *It's actually really nice, 'cause if you can't find a different girl and you want to get married, you can just get married to that girl.*

He went on to explain that he would like Polly to be his girlfriend 'because she's really nice to me.' Bobby also took cues from popular culture, taking tips on relationships from magazines and using idealised depictions of romantic life from television programmes as frames of reference.

Bobby: *Yeah. In this magazine it said if she picks something up for you then that'll be friends. And if they hold your hand then he wants to be boyfriend.*

TW: *Okay. Sophie?*

Sophie: *Erm. I saw a boy and girl sitting on a curb and they might have been boyfriend and girlfriend.*

Bobby: *Because, on this TV show there's someone called Tony and there's someone called Jessie⁷, and Tony loves Jessie.*

Bobby's attitude was quite unlike that of older boys described by Renold (2006). These boys both welcomed the status that could come with being a boyfriend in

⁷ A Disney Channel production about a teenaged nanny living in New York. Jessie, played by Debby Ryan, is an extremely glamorous girl from Texas who has moved to New York to become an actor on Broadway, but earns her living as nanny to a rich family with adopted children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Tony is the doorman at the family's apartment.

that it confirmed their heterosexual masculinity, but also feared romantic relationships as potentially feminising.

Although most girl / boyfriend pairings were quite brief, and sometimes involved multiple partners, some of the children did have longstanding and intense friendships. A few even considered themselves to be in serious romantic relationships with another child. Some children had very intense friendships that dated back to when they first started school and that could easily move into the realm of “romantic” relationships. On the other hand, Charlotte thought that having a boyfriend would be ‘horrible’ and Sophie explained that she did not want a boyfriend until she went ‘to college’, but both girls spent most of their break-times with Karen and Mick and knew every detail of their friends’ long-term relationship.

6.4.1 *Rihanna, Nick and Alan*

The dynamics of Nick, Alan and Rhianna’s friendship illustrates many of those issues that define young children’s relationships both in and out of school.

Since Nursery School Rihanna, Nick and Alan had been practically inseparable. Even in lessons they would gravitate toward each other whenever possible, and at break-times the three could almost always be seen playing together, often rebuffing others who wanted to join their games. Indeed, this small group had come to be seen by both parents and teachers as something of “a handful” when they were together, parents often warning teachers that they should be kept apart in class and commenting that they found the three difficult to handle when together. While they undeniably had a close relationship, what became clear, from

speaking to Rihanna, was that although she regarded Nick and Alan as her 'best friends', her perception of their relationship was not all rosy. She intimated that the boys often had the upper-hand in their games.

Rhianna: *Well, I normally just play whatever they want to play, like trains and babies.*

Mick also claimed that he sometimes played with Rhianna when Nick and Alan were 'mean' to her. Best (1983: 113) has identified a tendency of the elementary school boys she observed to tease and hit the girls they chased. Although Nick and Alan did tease Rihanna, they did not resort to hitting. They frequently stole her scarf or hat. She would then chase the boys throughout playtime, struggling to get her things back. Despite this, Rihanna rarely complained about the boys' behaviour, only expressing her dissatisfaction if they failed to return her property at lining-up time. It seemed that this was all part of the play. As with many girls-chase-boys / boys-chase-girls games I frequently witnessed on the playground, rather than undermining gender difference, Rihanna, Alan and Nick's play often reinforced and highlighted gender difference and separation; these children *were* engaged in borderwork (Thorne 1993).

For birthday treats, the three would go to the cinema, for pizza or bowling together, with Nick and Alan's parents acting as supervisors. However, it was rare for Rihanna to be included in more general out of school play. Her mother was not particularly friendly with the boys' parents and Nick, like Alan and Bobby, usually based his out of school friendships around children of his parents' friends.

During our focus group sessions Nick talked about his best / girlfriend Jenny, the daughter of close friends of his parents. He explained that he and Jenny were going on holiday together and that they had been on holiday previously to Disneyland:

Nick: . . . I'm going with her on holiday this weekend. And we're going to stay there only for two nights, and we're going to stay in a caravan together. And I'm hoping me and Jenny will sleep in the room together. Because when we went to Disneyland together, we went to Paris first and we slept in the same bed together. And when we went Disneyland we were in different rooms but next to each other. And we both had bunk beds and we, and I slept in the top bunk and Jenny slept on the bottom bunk in her bedroom.

Later, Nick explained why he regarded Jenny as his girlfriend, reflecting the children's understanding of what it means to have a girlfriend or boyfriend. He referred to activities undertaken with his parents:

Nick: . . . we don't really see her a lot because she lives a long way from us: she lives in _____. And erm, she sometimes, like, goes out with us on holiday. And she, we go 'round houses and have tea, and the grown-ups get holidays when they 'phone each other, and sometimes we go round Jenny's house and we get a buffet together.

It also emerged that the three children's longstanding friendship had possibly developed into something of an unrequited love triangle. Following Nick's declarations about Jenny, I asked if the other children in his group would like to have girlfriends or boyfriends:

Alan: *I wouldn't.*

Nick: *Alan's already got one.*

Alan: *No I haven't!*

Nick: *Rihanna.*

Alan: *No.*

Alan's response was sharp and emphatic. He wanted to make it absolutely clear that he did not want a girlfriend and that he was not Rihanna's boyfriend. Alan's determination to distance himself from the possibility of having a girlfriend might also be read as distancing himself from the emotional or feminine. On the other hand, Rihanna was obviously upset when she talked about Jenny and Nick.

Rhianna: *I would like Nick for a boyfriend, but he says there's a special key for him and Jenny to open a lock. That's why he won't do it.*

These complicated dynamics could go some way to explain the pattern and persistence of the group's play, which had become almost ritualised by Year 2. As Thorne (1983: 81) explains: 'The ambiguities of borderwork allow the signalling of sexual or romantic, as well as aggressive meanings, and the two often mix together.' The tension between 'pleasure' and physical and verbal 'harassment'

has been identified in a number of other studies of children's heterosexual interactions that also potentially establish a formula for future relationships (Best 1983; Thorne 1998; Renold 2005: 115; Skelton 2001). Despite these complications and tensions the three remained firm friends throughout the year.

6.4.2 Mick and Karen

Karen and Mick sitting up a tree

K-I-S-S-I-N-G.

First comes love.

Second comes marriage.

Then comes a baby in a golden carriage.⁸

Unlike the other children in the study, Mick and Karen were two children who had a well-established and widely acknowledged girlfriend-boyfriend relationship. The pair had gained much status from their position as the class's "golden couple". Although Karen was sometimes teased on the playground by her friends because she was "in love" with Mick, the other girls also often spoke with a good deal of respect about their relationship. Mick frequently announced that Karen was his girlfriend to anyone within earshot, one day, for example, proudly announcing that instead of buying her a birthday card saying: 'You are 7', he had bought a card with the words: 'To my girlfriend' across the front. However, by the time of the focus group interviews their relationship had begun to go downhill. During our

⁸ Rosetta and Sophie changed the names from Rapunzel and Flynn to Karen and Mick to create their own playground chant which they performed for my benefit.

interviews, Mick was still quick to point out that he and Karen were girlfriend and boyfriend.

Mick: *We have a live girlfriend and boyfriend film here.*

TW: *You and . . . ?*

Mick: *Karen.*

TW: *So how long have you two been boyfriend and girlfriend?*

Mick: *Since, I think it was about . . . I started saying, "I love you" about November. And I gave her a Valentine's card on this Valentine's//*

Sophie: *Yeah, you did.*

Mick: *I know. And some chocolates.*

TW: *So what makes you want to be Karen's boyfriend then?*

Mick: *Erm, I'm not really sure. It's just, there's no other girl like her.*

Unlike the relationship dynamics among the KS1 children described by Connolly (1998), Mick and Karen's boyfriend-girlfriend status was well established and well regarded among their peers. Especially for the girls, the pair seemed to act as a proxy for their hetero-romantic ideals. Due to Mick's eagerness to share the details, all the children in his class were aware of his relationship with Karen. For example, Alan explained that he knew Mick and Karen were together because Mick had done 'something on *PowerPoint*, and he put a big love heart, and he put: "To Karen from Mick" '. Furthermore, their parents clearly took a hand in supporting their relationship: Mick had not gone alone to the shop to buy Karen a Valentine's card and chocolates, nor had Karen managed to shop unaccompanied for the card and teddy bear that she had given him. However, as Mick explained

this support did not extend to ensuring they could see each other out of school: 'I live far away from school so we can't go 'round to each other's houses.' He went on to consider what they would do if they could meet out of school: 'Maybe we could go 'round to each other's parks. But my park is bigger and it has a slide and everything.' In fact, they lived less than two miles apart from each other, close by in adult terms but far enough away that the children would need to rely on their parents to facilitate a visit. As with the older children in Renold's (2005) study, 'going out' was a school-based activity.

Another clear difference between Karen and Mick and the children who took part in Connolly's (1998) study was the lack of sexual language and behaviour associated with their pairing. Mick was quite different from Connolly's five- and six-year old 'bad boys', who bragged about the number of girlfriends they had, and who used (sometimes violent) sexual language to describe what they had done or wanted to do to the girls. Unerringly, Mick spoke of Karen with affection and admiration.

The lack of sexualised language and the parental complicity in Mick and Karen's relationship did not mean that Mick failed to derive some of his masculine identity from it. Many of the aspects of the way Mick would do boy would, in previous studies, have marked him out to be positioned as Other by his peers (for example see Francis, Skelton and Read 2010; Mac an Ghail 1994; Renold 2006; Willis 1977). However, far from being bullied and teased he was, if not revered by the other boys, at least well-liked and respected. Some of that respect was clearly derived from his boyfriend status, which he exploited whenever possible.

Later, however, Mick explained that life with Karen was not as stable as he first indicated. It became clear that their relationship was under threat when Bobby suggested that Karen had kissed Dev. As this was discussed further, Mick became quite upset and defensive.

Sophie: *There's something going wrong with Karen, Dev and Mick. Karen can't choose which boyfriend to have --- . She wants Mick, then she wants Dev.*

Mick: (upset) *She wants me, because I gave her a Valentine's card. I gave her chocolates. Dev didn't.*

Dev, another boy from the class, epitomised hegemonic masculinity within the school context. He was sociable, high attaining without working *too* hard, sporty and physically imposing; he generally would not start a fight but was quick to defend himself if he felt he had been wronged in some way.

Mick's assertion that Karen must have wanted him because of what he gave her shows obvious parallels with notions that women can be bought or are dependent upon men's generosity. In Mick's case, it was clear from his tone that he was genuinely puzzled that Karen could like Dev better than him, since he was so kind to her. There was no hint in the conversation that Mick was prepared to do battle for Karen or that he felt it in his power to control her. Rather, he was saddened and mystified. This is in stark contrast to the boys in Keddie's (2003: 295) study of 7–8 year-old boys whom she portrays as perceiving girls as 'property to fight over, possess or collect and evaluate.' Since neither Karen nor Dev took part in

this study it is unclear how they saw themselves in this relationship. It is uncertain how Dev would have responded had Mick determinedly acted to retain Karen as his girlfriend. Karen's feelings about Mick and Dev similarly went unexplored.

Here it can be seen that the children were performing and actively constructing their gendered and sexual identities in small, often overlapping groups. Some of these groups were very stable, as can be seen from Rihanna, Nick and Alan's friendship. However, children like Jeremy and William, seemed to have no stable friendship groups and would often be at the margins of other children's social interactions. They occupied a precarious social position and were vulnerable to rejection.

The boys in this study did not articulate concern that their masculine identities would be undercut either by having a girl as a friend or by having a girlfriend or girlfriends. In fact, Mick's position as Karen's boyfriend enhanced his status. The only girls who participated in the study who expressed any interest in having boyfriends were Rihanna and Eliza, who talked about being 'in love'. Similarly, some of the boys employed the discourses of romance and marriage when they discussed potential girlfriends. All of the conversations were firmly rooted within a heterosexual model, despite a number of children having close relationships with LGBT+ family members and family friends. What was evident was the high degree of emotional investment some of the children had in their relationships.

When considering curriculum content, therefore, it is important to acknowledge that children's girlfriend-boyfriend relationships are significant in the moment, not

just something that will come in their more “grown-up” futures. SRE should address these not only in terms of preparing children for their adult relationships but also in terms of enabling them to manage their feelings and negotiate their roles in relationships as they currently exist. It is also important that this provides opportunities for children to explore and acknowledge the possibility of diverse identities and relationships.

6.6 Conclusion

Throughout these interviews, what was evident was the emotional stock that children placed upon all their relationships: parent-child, sibling, friends, boyfriend-girlfriend, those they had with pets and the deceased. They sought to make sense of the world around them and were active in the construction of their own identities within friendship and family groups. Like adults, their performance of femininity and masculinity was inconsistent and sometimes contradictory.

Play behaviours (for example, children’s exclusionary practices, their games of chase and the conventions of their role play games) served to ensure that children’s gendered and sexual subjectivities were firmly delineated by and located within the heterosexual matrix. The hierarchies that operated within groups of girls and boys were not straightforward nor were they easy to negotiate. Hegemonic boys – the break-time footballers – dominated the playground space unchallenged by others. Boys who were able to call on some resources generally associated with hegemonic masculinity without being part of that small group were respected by others. On the whole, they were accepting, if not embracing, of others who failed to conform to dominant versions of masculinity and femininity.

On the playground children were usually able to choose their own friends and, within school rules and with consideration for others, their own games. Outside of school, personal choice was much more limited. Some children's parents deliberately regulated their sons' and daughters' friendships, deciding that certain children or activities were unsuitable. On other occasions, children's friendships were tied-up with their parents' relationships, as with Nick and Jenny. Simple practicalities, like locality and availability of friends were also factors. The impact of these restrictions is that children may experience friendship very differently inside and outside the school gates, and on occasion may find these difficult to reconcile.

The boys in this study did not use the extreme violent sexual language like that employed by those in other studies (e.g. Connolly 1998). Most of the girls in this study enjoyed the trappings of a girly-girl identity, saw pamper parties as fun, and wanted to limit boys' access to these. The children were trying to make sense of a gendered and sexual world around them. They often reverted to stereotypes to explain gender differences. Sometimes they tried to use reason to explore contradictions in their own and others' experiences, while on other occasions merely accepted that what they were experiencing could not, for them at least, be rationalised. Their assertions of gender equality were often qualified and they tended toward more conventional choices of clothing, interests and careers. Overall, however, there was a tendency to privilege the masculine.

Romantic relationships were part of the children's lives. I have referred to girlfriend-boyfriend relationships as "romantic" because throughout the children's conversations children talked about 'love', 'liking', 'being kind' and marriage. Some saw no issue with having multiple partners, others were much more attached to particular boys or girls, and some rejected the idea of having a girlfriend or boyfriend completely (for now, at least). Mick and Karen's relationship helped to bolster Mick's masculine identity and possibly served as a surrogate for the relationships that Karen's Year 2 girlfriends rejected. Despite the fact that some of the children's parents had talked about LGBT+ relationships within their own families and networks of friends and my care in asking about girlfriends and boyfriends in a very open way, all of these children talked about romantic relationships in purely heterosexual terms.

During the focus group sessions, the children showed themselves to be very capable of engaging in critical thinking about gender and sexuality. They were taking their first steps in questioning the world around them. Despite this ability to recognise occasions when their experiences did not fit with stereotypical views of the world, the children were unable to shake off heterosexist narratives that locate masculine as the norm and feminine as lesser.

Chapter 7: Discussion

It seemed that practically any girl who ever played on the bars in the playground would at one time or another be subjected to harassment from the boys. Sometimes they would suffer taunts and occasionally boys would pull the girls' skirts over their heads as they used the play equipment. The girls usually seemed resigned to this treatment, but sometimes they reached the end of their tether:

Penny and Amy were playing on the bars in the playground. As they rolled over the top their skirts flew up to expose their underwear. Each time they did so a small group of boys jeered and called out, 'We can see your knickers!' Penny and Amy repeatedly told the boys to leave them alone, but they persisted. Finally, Penny burst into tears and the two girls ran to the on-looking dinner supervisor wailing that the boys had been 'dissing' them.

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores some convergence and divergence in experience and opinion on the part of the adults who took part in this study. It also identifies areas where these adults' conception of children's experiences, knowledge and understanding of the world match or deviate from what the children in the study were saying.

Section 7.2 compares teachers' and parents' attitudes toward SRE. It explores how their own experiences have informed their thinking and their feelings about themselves as educators. In section 7.3 there is a comparison of parents' reliance on the discourse of childhood innocence with teachers' views on children's maturity and the impact of these on conceptions of "appropriate" learning. These views are then set against children's knowledge and understanding and their curiosity in the areas of sex and relationships.

Sections 7.4 and 7.5, interrogate conceptions of family and "romantic" relationships and the extent to which these are, for both adults and children, firmly rooted within the heterosexual matrix. This then leads into an examination of gender stereotyping and heterosexism in section 7.6. The ways that these forces counter teachers' desire to provide a curriculum that promotes social justice are also examined.

Finally, adults' impulse to protect children from the dangers of the wider world and the impact on children's lived experience are explored in 7.7. Rather than these parents presenting themselves as 'paranoid' what emerges is some regulation of children's lives but also some latitude in children's access to the outside world and the virtual world of the internet (Furedi 2002).

7.2 Comfort and confidence

Exploring the experiences and levels of confidence of adults revealed a high degree of parity between the teachers and parents. As groups, they both exhibited

some general uneasiness about their own roles in teaching children about sex and relationships.

Throughout the sessions, parents often spoke of their trust in their children's teachers' ability to provide information in a manner that was knowledge-rich and developmentally appropriate. However, teachers frequently expressed a lack of certainty about what and how information should be communicated. They spoke of their lack of training, their desire for clear guidelines and for some support from "experts" or more experienced professionals. This was an area where most of the adults expressed a lack of faith in their own abilities and, sometimes, discomfort at the thought of addressing sensitive topics with children.

In a similar way to participants in the parents' focus groups, some of the teachers confided their apprehension about sharing information with their own children. Mrs Harvey explained that, 'being a parent as well --- you don't always know what to say'. Like those in the parents' groups, these anxieties often stemmed from their own childhood experiences. Their professional status did not make these teachers immune to the same unease faced by those who had no training as educators and did not spend their working days with children.

Participation in the focus groups did prompt Mrs Brown to tackle a topic she had previously avoided addressing with her daughter. She had initially been reluctant to use the anatomically correct names for genitalia with Eliza, considering them to be unsuitable for young children. However, following the first round of focus group discussions, she decided to broach the subject.

Mrs Brown: *Well, since then [the previous focus group session] I talked about it with Eliza . . . talked about the different parts and what the proper names are, rather than our names for them. I've taken that step with her.*

She went on to describe Eliza's response:

Well, Eliza said, after we'd talked about the names for --- . She said, "Are they naughty words?" And I said, "Well they're not naughty words, Eliza, but they're not words you'd go 'round saying all the time. It's got to be within – have a reason for saying it."

A number of studies have demonstrated that children are often aware that asking questions and talking about anything sexual is something they should avoid (Davies and Robinson 2010; Frankham 2006; Milton 2003; Walker and Milton 2006). Eliza's question, 'Are they naughty words?', indicates that she realised her mother was sharing information that was problematic in some way. However, beyond this, she reacted to being taught this new vocabulary much as she would any other new piece of information. This surprised her mother, who had found initiating the conversation somewhat nerve-wracking.

Teachers also voiced respect for parents' rights and their ability to judge what was suitable for their children. It was, in part, for this reason that all but Mrs Old supported parents' prerogative to withdraw their children from SRE. Some were also looking at the issue from their own position as parents and how they felt about

their own children's education and wellbeing. There was also a strategic reason for the acceptance of withdrawal. This would allow the school to decide on what was going to be taught while the possibility of withdrawal would mitigate against parents' complaints.

As discussed above, Mrs Paxton felt that sex education should take place within the family rather than the public space of the school. In part, at least, this was driven by her religious convictions and a need to be sure that her children were taught in line with her beliefs. Her objections were also firmly entrenched within the discourse of childhood innocence. While the other parents did express similar concerns that they did not want their children to learn too much at a young age, they never suggested they would remove their children from lessons. Some of the parents, like Mrs Thomas and Ms Knight, also recognised the precarious position of teachers, and thought that school policies and the right to withdraw should help to protect them. These parents wanted to work with the school to ensure that the curriculum was "suitable", and hoped that it would provide them with information, in the same way as it offered maths and reading events for parents, to help them support their children's learning and prepare them for any questions that might arise.

There was a parallel in the way the teachers and parents viewed the prospect of teaching children about sex and relationships. Just as some parents (Mrs Gage, Mrs Paxton, Mrs Friend, Mrs Winston) thought they would be embarrassed and so were happy to hand over the bulk of the responsibility to teachers, a few of the teachers (Miss Young, Miss Redfearne, Miss Peake and Mr Mayall) also feared

embarrassment and that broaching some subjects might have a detrimental effect on their relationship with pupils.

The principle that teachers act in *loco parentis* rings true here. Those teachers who felt most confident to have conversations about sex and relationships with their own children (Mrs Blake, Mr Marshall, Mrs Old and Mr Hall) tended also to be those who were most happy to teach pupils SRE. It was also the case that for those adults in the parents' group who were also teachers (Mrs Kennedy and Mrs Waites) there was a mirroring of the way that they dealt with their own children and the way they expected to educate children in school. The exceptions were Mrs Brown and Mrs Harvey who appeared far more at ease when acting in their professional roles than when embarking on discussions with their own children. It seemed that for these women the mantle of "teacher" gave them a sense of distance and authority that made them feel more at ease in the context of the classroom.

Mrs Paxton was not the only adult whose religious beliefs had an impact on the way they viewed SRE. This was the root of Mr Heymann's declaration that before taking part in the focus groups he needed to make it clear that he did not want his children to be taught about same-sex relationships. During the sessions, he moved away from this position to one where he could see the value of this topic being covered so long as he was kept informed about lesson content and scheduling. This way he could balance the school's input with further discussions with his children in which he could put forward his faith perspective. This was important in that he demonstrated an understanding that education should be

concerned with what children need rather than what parents want. He also appreciated that this was not just about preparing children for adulthood but informing them about their current social worlds.

Among the teachers, Mrs Garrow explained how she 'struggled' with the idea of teaching about same-sex relationships due to her Christian beliefs. In another group, teachers reflected on how challenging it would be for those who might disagree with the curriculum, the ways they might overcome their personal discomfort and the problems associated with ensuring that all children received the intended provision.

Lack of experience, training, adults' childhood interactions with their own parents and religious belief all had an impact on participants' willingness to embark on SRE with children, either in their role as teacher or parent. Also evident is the mutual respect that teachers and parents had for each other, with parents viewing the teachers as skilled professionals who had the best interest of their children at heart and teachers respecting parents' rights and responsibilities for their children. Nevertheless, both teachers and parents also talked about some parents acting as poor examples to their children, expressing reprehensible views, and not having the knowledge or skills to educate their children. Some parents might also cause trouble if at school their children were taught anything they disagreed with. This, along with the conviction that parents should have a voice in deciding what their children should or should not learn when it came to sex and relationships, meant that there was support for parents' right to withdraw children from SRE lessons.

7.3 Adults' draw upon the discourses of maturity and innocence

Objections were sometimes raised regarding potential topics within the SRE curriculum that were largely couched within the discourse of childhood innocence (with parents placing greater emphasis on this than teachers) and “readiness”. There was much debate about the material contained in the *Living and Growing* DVD (Channel 4 2006). This was particularly the case when the adults considered the segments dealing with naming genitalia, the introduction of the idea that children might gain pleasure from their bodies and the DVD's reference to ‘sex parts’. While not all the adults responded negatively to the DVD, their reactions were cautious and complex.

Teachers' initial responses to the use of the scientific terms to name genitalia and references to ‘nice’ feelings within the DVD were mixed. Their reservations stemmed from a number of concerns: whether the information (at least in the form it was presented) might be too complex for a six- or seven-year old to absorb and understand, parental reactions, whether children would be encouraged to use ‘rude’ language on the playground and the mention of pleasure and the possibility that this might provoke ‘inappropriate’ questions from children. However, as they considered the implications for children's learning and pedagogical approaches, and discussed the content of the programme, they tended to reason away some of their initial objections. They decided that children would quickly tire of repeating the names for genitalia. After some initial hesitation, some of the teachers also concluded covering most of these topics early in children's schooling could avoid problems in later years. The exception was the subject of pleasure.

Among the parent participants, Mrs Waites and Mrs Friend were happy to show the DVD in its entirety, despite some initial discomfort at the content. However, these two mothers acknowledged that not all parents would feel the same, agreeing that ‘many parents may need a bit of warning that children are going to come home with clitoris and things like that, definitely.’ The inclusion of the term clitoris and of references to pleasure in the DVD certainly did cause some anxiety among other parents.

Unlike the teachers, parents’ view of children as innocents, rather than on their ability to understand the information presented in the DVD, was solely at the root of their reluctance for the concept of pleasure to be introduced. Mrs Paxton and Mrs Winston were explicit in their statements that they were concerned that knowledge of potential ‘nice feelings’ might lead children (particularly girls) to engage in sexual behaviour, although it was unclear exactly what this meant. None of the teachers made anything close to this kind of suggestion.

These attitudes reflect the ‘pleasure vacuum’ that exists within the SRE curriculum throughout both primary and secondary schooling (Allen and Carmody 2012; Hirst 2013; Ingham 2005; Rasmussen 2012; Saunston 2013; Sundaram and Saunston 2016). References to pleasure within the documentation relating to the teaching of SRE are sparse. It does not appear in the DfEE’s (2000) *Sex and Relationship Guidance* document, nor Ofsted’s (2002) *Sex and Relationships* report, offering guidance on effective practice and expected learning outcomes. This position is retained in the government’s July 2018 draft for consultation document,

Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education (DfE 2018a). Here there is no mention of pleasure or desire; the only mention of enjoyment is a requirement for secondary school students to know 'that they have a choice to delay sex or to enjoy intimacy without sex' (DfE 2018a: 23). The PSHE Association's (2014) *Programme of Study* finally does mention pleasure at KS4 within the theme of 'Relationships', stating that:

pupils should have the opportunity to learn . . . to understand the role of sex in the media and its impact on sexuality (including pornography and related sexual ethics such as consent, negotiation, boundaries, respect, gender norms, sexual 'norms', trust, communication, *pleasure* [emphasis added], orgasms, rights, empowerment, sexism and feminism. (PSHE Association 2014: 18)

In *Sex Education for the 21st century* (Brook, PSHE Association and SEF 2014: 5) it is also suggested that SRE should be 'taught by people who are trained and confident in talking about issues such as healthy and unhealthy relationships, equality, *pleasure* [emphasis added], respect, abuse, sexuality, gender identity, sex and consent' (Brook, PSHE Association and SEF 2014: 5). None of these documents provide an explicit opportunity for primary aged children to interrogate pleasure, pleasant feelings or desire at any stage.

The failure to examine notions of pleasure and the reluctance of some of these adults even to name the clitoris (not just in KS1, but right through to secondary

school) has some troubling potential consequences for all pupils, but perhaps most significantly for girls and LGBT+ pupils, whose pleasure is by implication denied and delegitimised (Allen 2007; Allen and Carmody 2012; Fine 2007; Spencer, Maxwell and Aggleton 2008; Saunston 2013; Sundaram and Saunston 2016). This absence, and the implied sex for reproduction-only discourse, potentially has an uneven impact on the sexual development and the identities of girls and boys. It ultimately serves to maintain unbalanced power relationships and bolsters compulsory heterosexuality.

In fact, some of the teachers were quite explicit about their aversion to talking about pleasure with children, relating this back to the DVD's content and specific mention of the clitoris.

Mr Hall: *I think it's just a little bit too much; I mean they don't need to know that.*

Mrs Brown: *I think you're right.*

Mr Hall: *It's not a geography lesson as such, is it?*

Mrs Brown: *No.*

Miss McIntyre: *No, I think penis and vagina is sufficient.*

Mr Marshall: *I think leave 'clitoris' out until secondary, I would say.*

Miss Young: *Yes, I think it's ??? for Year 6, to be honest.*

Mr Marshall: *Yes, I've never dreamt of mentioning the word.*

Miss McIntyre: *It's when you're talking about sex for pleasure rather than sex for babies, isn't it, really?*

Despite their references to maturity and understanding, teachers' reluctance to talk about pleasure is the clearest indication that some implicitly clung to the discourse of childhood innocence. At times, perhaps when these teachers talked about maturity what they were actually referring to is innocence by another name.

Despite their objections to the DVD content, some of the parents and teachers did acknowledge that their sons experienced pleasure from their own bodies. Sometimes this resulted in anxiety or confusion for the boys because they were unsure if what they were experiencing was "normal". There are a number of possible explanations for the focus on boys. Perhaps parental identification only of boys gaining pleasure from touching themselves and having erections is related to the belief that for boys and men sexual prowess and taking pleasure are "natural" signifiers of masculinity, whereas for girls there is a greater emphasis on emotional connection in sexual encounters and purity as a signifier of femininity. Alternatively, parents might simply have only noticed their boys' behaviour.

By way of contrast, teachers described a number of instances of both girls and boys masturbating during lessons. Their concern here was not with the behaviour itself, which they generally regarded as completely normal for young children, but the situation in which it occurred (a public rather than private space) and that it prevented pupils from concentrating on their learning.

In addition to fears that 'too much' information might lead to action, there were also anxieties among parents and teachers that giving some information might lead on to further, more awkward, questions. The types of questions that worried

adults were about conception, intercourse and birth. What emerged from conversations with adults and children was that these types of queries were already arising among KS1 children and that at least some of the children had some ideas about pregnancy, birth and conception.

Mrs Brown: *I've had that question from Eliza, "Why did you have me?" And I've said, "Because mummy and daddy wanted you. Then she says, "Well, I want you to have another baby, so can't we have one?" So, then you get into that whole conversation, but how far do you go when they're four or five?*

Miss Peake: *Without//*

Mrs Brown: *Because she just thinks, "Well, if I want another baby let's have one." Her and me.*

Miss Thomson: *What did she say the other day? "You know how the man brings the baby?" So, you know, when she's asking about it. She's inquisitive about it and she wants to know. As soon as she said that I was: ooo!*

The teachers appeared more sanguine about the prospect of teaching children about pregnancy and conception and assumed a greater degree of prior knowledge than those in the parent group. As Mrs Moore pointed out: '... a lot have had younger brothers, or cousins, or other family. So, they've probably experienced it and they probably know more than we think that they know.' Certainly, conversations with and among the children confirmed the assumption that children with younger siblings had some understanding of these topics. For example, when the children were drawing their families Rihanna included a picture (Fig. 10) of her pregnant mother and unborn baby, while she explained.

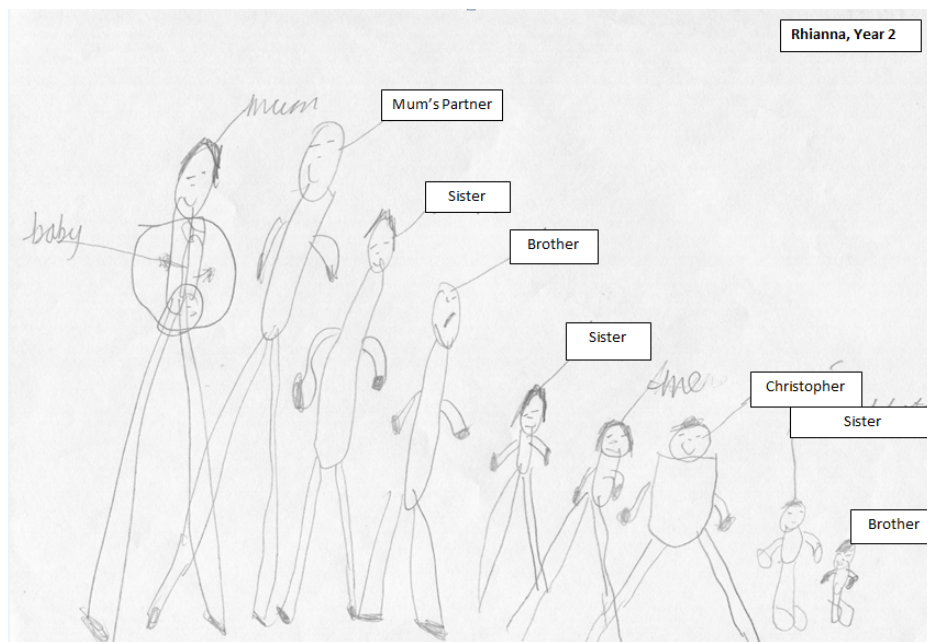


Fig. 10

Rhianna: I'm going to draw a bump on mummy's tummy; then I'm going to draw a baby inside . . . Look, there's the baby inside the tummy. I don't think it's very happy.

TW: Why isn't it very happy?

Rhianna: Because it's sleeping upside down!

TW: Why's it sleeping upside down Rhianna?

Rhianna: Because that's the way to the exit!

Later, the children shared their pictures with the group. Rhianna began to talk about her drawing when Charlotte joined in to show that she understood some elements of the birthing process.

Rhianna: Here, there's a little baby.

Sophie: *What's that there?*

TW: *That's the baby's head.*

Sophie: *Look at her mummy's tummy. Look at her//*

Charlotte: *It turns 'round when it's ready for birth.*

TW: *Is that right?*

Charlotte: *Yeah. It's upside down now.*

In a later session, responding to a comment from Rihanna that her mother was not able to drive because she was pregnant, Bobby and Mick were keen to show that they had some information about pregnancy. The boys demonstrated their understanding and some misconceptions, which were not challenged by the other children in the group (Rihanna, Charlotte and Jeremy).

Bobby: *Babies, do you know, when someone's pregnant they do actually drink wine because the mum drinks something like that. Babies eat what the mum eats and the mums drink.*

Mick: *Yeah, that means they can't eat hard things, like chocolate.*

Bobby: *Yeah, cause they haven't got teeth.*

Mick: *That was mum's nightmare, for my mum.*

Bobby: *Yeah, because babies don't have teeth, so they'd swallow it, get ill and die.*

In a classroom, these misconceptions could be addressed. It is also possible that statements like these would lead to further questions that could easily be immediately answered with a simple response from a teacher or taken up in a later

lesson. However, it seems that teachers were unclear how they should respond to these types of situations. They worried that parents might complain if they tried to satisfy children's curiosity, especially because, as Mrs Brown recalled, this had previously happened when Year 6 teachers had been covering the topic of evolution in science. At the same time, most teachers guessed that parental complaints would come from only a few, and prior experience told some of them that this was likely to be the case.

In any other subject area teachers' attitude to developing children's knowledge and reactions to children's questions would be totally at odds with some of the sentiments expressed in these interviews, and Miss Peake was aware of the contradictory position they were taking in this area of children's learning:

It's difficult, because you want them to be inquisitive. And you would encourage that questioning in another area, but when it comes to how you make babies it's then how you answer that.

Similarly, the notion put forward by a number of teachers and parents that SRE should be taught when children are "ready" or in a responsive manner, i.e. only when children demonstrate an interest through questioning, runs counter to educational practice more generally and would be unmanageable in practice. For teachers, the idea of maturity was a key stumbling block to the teaching of SRE. Mrs Brown explained:

Mrs Brown: *But you can have children in a year group. We've got those super-mature ones, but we've also got those children who aren't of that maturity level; could they maybe benefit from having that in another year's time? I can think of examples of several children in my current class who I think they're maybe mature enough to have that conversation, where you could have a more in-depth conversation with those children. They're at that point.*

It was frequently unclear what teachers meant by maturity. Sometimes it seemed to relate to the usual educational standards of attainment, on others it seemed to be more about behavior and on others about the physical development of children's bodies.

Demonstrating how a heterosexist discourse dominates schools, for some teachers the question of maturity was also explicitly related to gender. Girls were considered more mature than boys, who were likely to be silly, challenging and to embarrass girls if taught alongside them. Certainly, some research in secondary settings does indicate that these behaviours are rooted in a range of underlying causes, including boys' embarrassment, living up to teacher and peer expectations, access to pornography and disengagement (Buston, Wright and Hart 2002; Halstead and Reiss 2003; Haste 2013; Hilton 2001, 2003, 2007; Kehily 2002; Measor 2004). These themes are central to debates focused on boys' (under)achievement, the nature of the wider curriculum and valuing a form of masculinity that rejects academic commitment as 'girlish' and / or 'gay': thereby, also indicating the lesser nature of these two identities and illuminating the levels

of homophobia and misogyny existent within schools (Blythe *et al* 2003; DePalma and Atkinson 2010; Skelton 2001; Stonewall 2017; Walkerdine 1989).

As Skelton (2001) points out, among those who take the approach that boys require a certain boy-centred pedagogy and curriculum, there is a tendency to call upon ideas of what is considered “natural” and to regard boys, and by implication girls also, as a homogeneous group. There is also a failure to recognize the potential reinforcing impact of such an approach on the way children construct their gender identities. As Connolly (2006), drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, explains:

. . . while the specific ways in which boys think and behave within the school will be influenced by what experiences they bring with them, these will be fundamentally mediated by all relationships, objects and events within the school itself. All these factors contribute to and thus make possible the specific form of masculinity acquired and enacted by the boys within the context of the school.
(Connolly 2006:146)

In all the schools where I have worked as a teacher, the challenges associated with teaching boys have been the subject of much discussion, but only in the case of SRE was the suggested solution to educate boys and girls separately. Such an approach, I argue, is problematic as it denies the diverse identities of both boys and girls, potentially reinforces essentialist notions of girlhood and boyhood which deny individual agency in the construction of gender identity and may deny girls

and boys access to the same SRE. It also reinforces the binary construct of “girl” and “boy”, with its focus on difference and an imbalance of power. To some extent, this also undermines the position of female members of staff who are viewed as less capable of “handling” the boys than their male counterparts.

However, it is important to recognise that, as Alldred and David (2007) demonstrate, sometimes girls and boys express a preference for being taught SRE separately, for at least some of the time. Schools should also be careful to ensure that, if they make the decision to educate girls and boys together, this does not inadvertently develop into an institutionally accepted opportunity for sexual harassment, which has already been demonstrated to be a significant problem in primary schools (Connolly 1998; DfE 2018c; Ofsted 2018; Renold 2002, 2005; Skelton 1997).

The issue of innocence was raised primarily by the parents’ groups. It is also notable that Mrs French and Mrs Brown were both more reluctant to educate their own children about sex and relationships than they were a class of pupils. Attachment to the concept of innocence tended to be related specifically to adults’ own children and it might be that they saw this as a reflection on themselves as parents. For example, Mrs Paxton described her oldest daughter (aged 10) as ‘quite a naïve child’, and Mrs Fellowes reflected that her daughters ‘don’t actually ask a lot of questions’. This meant that both mothers did not feel they had neglected their duty to inform their (uninterested) children, but also allowed them to locate themselves as good parents with innocent children. For parents, it is important to maintain childhood innocence, while a good teacher should educate

children as much as possible. For teacher-parents this potentially provokes particular tensions.

7.4 Stable loving families

Children's interpretation of what constitutes a family might be considered at odds with the descriptions provided in the statutory guidance (DfEE 2000) and later reinforced in the *Bailey Review* (2011). The guidance states that SRE 'is about the understanding of the importance of marriage for family life, stable loving relationships, respect, love and care'. It goes on to explicitly link 'the value of family life, marriage, and stable and loving relationships for the nurture of children', potentially undermining the validity of those relationships without the presence, or purpose, of children (DfEE 2000: 5). Similarly, the new draft guidance states: 'Pupils should know . . . that stable, caring relationships, which may be of different types, are at the heart of happy families, and are important for children's security as they grow up' (DfE 2018a: 16).

I contend that, if SRE is to have any real benefit for children it should reflect the reality of children's lives and the broad social world they inhabit, building from children's own understanding of these. Yet, this restricted view of family is mired in a patriarchal value system that by implication privileges a particular heterosexual model of family, centred on 'bringing up children' and which, in the DfEE's 2000 guidance, is unflinchingly portrayed as rewarding for its members (DfEE 2000:11). More recent guidance continues to place an emphasis on children being able to recognise the positive characteristics and effects of family relationships, but does also state that this can help children to recognise when they are experiencing a toxic situation and that they should be taught where and

how to seek help (DFE 2018a). Nowhere, does government guidance recognise partnerships without children as a family, and a strong emphasis remains on legally sanctioned partnerships (DfE 2018a).

As shown above, these children's interpretations of family are far looser than those prescribed by the guidance, with their inattention to legal or blood ties. Adults' perspectives and experiences of family are also often at variance with those portrayed in teaching requirements. Some of the younger teachers, in particular, took a more fluid view of what constitutes family that in some aspects parallels that of the children.

Miss Young: *In my experience of the family, who I would call family aren't related to me.*

Miss McIntyre: *Yes.*

Miss Young: *People who are related to me, I perhaps wouldn't class as family really, so I think it depends. And I think they need to understand that it's your personal situation, how you see it. And that's okay, isn't it?*

The adults in this study reported a wide range in their experiences of family structures and characteristics, and of gender expression, both in their professional and personal lives. Given the anecdotal evidence presented, it is also likely that the experience of children in any class would reflect this diversity.

Regardless of personal experience and a general desire that children should understand the world they inhabit, members of the parent groups repeatedly

returned to a form of family reflected in the guidance documents (DfEE 2000; DfE2018a). Recognising the heterosexist agenda of the curriculum more broadly when discussing the use of fiction texts in the classroom, parents talked briefly about the possibility of widening the range of families depicted in children's books while still clinging to the "traditional" family model for their own children. In this instance, Mrs Winston's and Mrs Brown's comments epitomised most of the adults' views on teaching about family.

Mrs Winston: *I don't know if I'd be happy with it. I'm not discriminating at all but, for me it's husband, wife and baby, or children. I wouldn't say I'd be happy that they're learning it, but I think because of today's society they have to learn it.*

* * * * *

Mrs Brown: *But then Eliza does ask, you know. Because she said, "I want to marry you." To me. And I want to marry daddy. But I said, "You can't marry someone in your family." And we had a talk about that. And then she said, "Can I marry a girl then?"*

Miss Thomson: *It's difficult, isn't it?*

Mrs Brown: *She has. She's asked. Then she says, "I'll marry Jimmy, then." Or, "I'll marry such and such." But then I don't know if I give the right answer. Because I say, how I want ideally, which is maybe wrong.*

Mr Mayall: *I think rather than focusing on, or highlighting, perhaps it's just one of a whole variety of relationships. Isn't it? And no relationship is probably better or worse than any other. They're just different, aren't they?*

Mrs Brown: *I think it's hard though, as a parent. Because you have an ideal about the path your child's going to take.*

Miss Thomson: *Exactly.*

Mrs Brown: *They're going to get married, they're going to have children. You hope that.*

Mrs Brown's 'ideal path' for Eliza meant a husband and children. What was also clear was Eliza's attachment to the notion of marriage but, on this occasion, less so heterosexuality. Her questions about who she could marry suggest that she had no strong ideas about the gender of the person she should marry. She was exploring the "rules" in her conversation with her mother.

Within the context of the family, adults also pondered whether children should be introduced to the topics of bereavement and divorce. In both instances, two perspectives were balanced against one another: concerns that covering these two issues would prompt children to be fearful versus the possibility that it would ensure children developed empathy toward others who were suffering these circumstances and that children would be prepared for the worst.

Some of the children in the group seemed to take bereavement in their stride. As discussed in Chapter 4, children often included the deceased in their family pictures. They talked about how they had interacted with aged or sick grandparents before their deaths and where they might be now. Sophie talked about the future demise of the family dog, which she was ready to replace. None of these children had, however, suffered the death of a parent or sibling.

The same tensions emerged within the adults' groups as with discussions of topics like same-sex relationships and some of the biological aspects of SRE. While some adults considered it important to be proactive about subjects like divorce and bereavement, others were more circumspect, worrying that they might unsettle children if these topics were discussed.

In the case of bereavement the teachers leaned much more toward taking a reactive approach. They would be happy to support individual children suffering a loss and talk to their classes about the subject should this situation arise. Parents were more divided and unsure. Some thought their children would be frightened if this subject were discussed but others were much more open to the possibility.

Mrs Waites: *Definitely, you should be talking about it.*

Mrs Fellowes: *If it's sensitively done, yes.*

Mrs Waites: *That's it, and in a way, it's kind of like, you can go alongside how can people help us, when we've got a problem, when something, you know, horrible happens. And it also gives them free rein that if they want to talk about something that's happening. Then they've got that ability, maybe at home they can't do because the rest of the family is going through it. It's like a safe environment for them to talk about their feelings as well, whether it's the cat died or you know, a family member, or...*

Mrs Fellowes: *Especially if you're talking about almost like a life cycle, things don't just get born, they don't just disappear, you know...*

Mrs Waites: *Yes, that's it, and if it's discussed like everything else, that it's natural and normal, and it's normal to have the feelings that you get alongside it, like you have, you know, happiness at birth, and you can have sadness at the end as well.*

Mrs Thomas argued that children should be taught about bereavement 'because then it's not such a shock to them when it actually happens'. She also thought that discussing bereavement might help to alleviate some of her children's fears about death, rather than promote them:

When I first got sick that was something that did come up a lot. And they worried about. So --- it's been very prevailing, every time I have to go to hospital: "Mummy, you going to die?"

Similarly, a few parents were concerned that talk of divorce would unsettle their children and make them 'feel vulnerable' (Ms Franklin). Mrs Friend recounted how her son, Alan, was more sensitive to the prospect of his parents divorcing since his friend Rihanna's parents had separated, voicing this fear whenever she argued with her husband and worrying that he would no longer see his father. This led her to ponder whether it would be worse or better for him to have learned about divorce and separation in school, explaining that '[Alan] was very upset about that, because Rihanna was upset, so it concerned him a lot. So, I don't know.'

Even though Mr Heymann thought that divorce was often an easy option for people having difficulties in their relationships, he still felt that this was an important subject for teachers to address with children:

I would, actually, proactively talk about that because if they are going through that we don't know what effects it's going to have on them. And it might be that just by talking about it, or by their friends being aware of it they stop worrying about it and think other people are going through what I'm going through. And they don't have to suffer in silence.

Mr Heymann's recognition of the potential benefits in terms of children's emotional well-being, relationships with others and for teachers understanding of pupils' home lives was repeated by other parents.

In general, most the parents were at ease divorce being covered in the context of teaching about different types of families, particularly as these are relatively common occurrences. For teachers, talking about single parent families, divorce, separation and parents forming new relationships was not a matter of debate. They met these families every day and saw no reason for not discussing these specific family experiences and formations in a way they would any other family or relationship.

Some of the children who participated had parents who had separated or had friends whose parents had done so; some had also needed to adjust to their parents' new partners. While they drew, Jeremy and Mick talked about this subject:

Jeremy: *Just putting Keith on now. Just doing it quick.*

Bobby: *Who's Keith?*

Jeremy: *My mum's boyfriend.*

TW: *Has he lived with you for a long time?*

Jeremy: *Yep. Like last year.*

TW: *Since last year?*

Mick: *Like Rihanna. She, she had a dad, but her mum had a boyfriend and her mum is getting, got married now, I think. And//*

TW: *She's going to get married, isn't she?*

Mick: *Yes, because Rihanna's mum and dad split up so they're going to get married again.*

Rihanna's parents had separated and she no longer saw her father. Her mother was pregnant; she and her children were living with a new partner whom she was due to marry after the birth of their baby. Rihanna's picture reflected the family that she lived with every day: her siblings, her mother and her mothers' partner; she omitted her father.

The children who took part in this study had experienced divorce or separation in their own families or those of their friends. Some had experienced the death of loved ones. Families took a variety of forms amongst this small group of children and their definition of family was at variance with that commonly held by adults, although even here it was evident that adult participants' concept of family was a fluid one. Nonetheless, a number of the adults related to the notion of an idealised family configuration, one that they saw as a traditional family with children, and a father and a mother in a stable long-term relationship (usually, but not always,

married). This was the adult life they wanted for their children. The majority of these adults were at ease with the notion that their children should be taught about a greater range of relationships, but were also keen to protect them from harsh realities that they might find disturbing.

7.5 (Heterosexual) relationships

As previously discussed, the adults who took part in this study had encountered a broad range of sexual and gender identities among their families and friends. For some this had caused discomfort at a personal level. For Mrs Brown, the feelings were more complex. She had found it difficult to come to terms with her father's homosexuality, which was revealed after a long relationship with her mother. She sometimes found being out in public with him and his partner upsetting due to other peoples' reactions.

Mrs Brown: *Because it's my dad, you know. I go out with him and his partner, who is very feminine, and everybody stands and looks at them. And I'm thinking, I'm a bit protective, "Hang on that's my dad." But I //*

Miss Thomson: *He is your dad, to you, isn't he?*

Mrs Brown: *But I feel uncomfortable because he's my dad. He's my dad and people are looking at him, and they must be thinking, "Who's she? Who's he" Because his partner's my age. "What's the relationship there?" And people stop and stare. They make comments.*

Despite, or perhaps because of this, Mrs Brown was uncomfortable with the idea of young children being taught about same-sex relationships. Miss Redfearne and

Miss Harvey regarded their own experiences as a sign that children should be taught about same-sex relationships, because they thought their own negative reactions to these were based on a lack of familiarity and understanding.

All the teachers with children of their own had engaged them in some kind of conversation in which they had begun to explain homosexuality and same-sex relationships. Mr Marshall, for example, had taken the initiative to explain same-sex relationships to his five- and seven-year old daughters, aiming to avoid confusion and the possibility that they might cause upset. They were not usually spurred on by an immediate need to explain a particular relationship or an individual's gender or sexual identity.

Among the parent cohort there was much more variation. Some parents had addressed the issue because they had friends or family in same-sex relationships, others had waited or were waiting for their children to ask questions. Among the parent participants only Mr Egan and Ms Franklin had discussed homosexuality and same-sex relationships with their three children without the impetus of feeling the need to explain a particular relationship in their close circle.

Underlying all these conversations, be they with parents or teachers, there seemed to be an implicit assumption of their own children's heterosexuality, and for some parents explicitly so. Mrs Thomas, for example, had been clear with her sons that she expected their lives to unfold in a neat sequence of events that included heterosexual marriage (see above). Speaking at a time when same-sex marriage was yet to be legalised, Mrs Brown also outlined her hopes for her son

and daughter that included marriage and children. Although none of the other adults were as forthright as these two women, it was significant that no parent (no matter which cohort) openly acknowledged the possibility that their own children would be anything but heterosexual.

When I broached the subject of girlfriend / boyfriend relationships with the children I always phrased my question in such a way as to leave open the nature of the relationships to a diverse interpretation of sexuality, e.g. I asked the Year 1 children: ‘. . . do any of you have girlfriends or boyfriends?’; and of a group of Year 2s, I enquired: ‘What does it mean to have a girlfriend or boyfriend?’ Without exception, the behaviours and relationships the children went on to describe were heterosexual in nature and often rooted in a traditional romance narrative that would ultimately lead to marriage in adulthood.

In fact, some of the younger teachers recounted conversations that had taken place when pupils had discursively positioned them in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood due to their unmarried status. Miss Thomson outlined children’s responses when she explained that she did not have a husband and lived with friends.

Miss Thomson: *But I’ve also had them, “So, you don’t live with your mum and dad? So are your mum and dad dead, then?” They can’t grasp that concept of in-between that phase of being a teenager and high school and //*

Mr Mayall: *You don’t fit into a nice neat category, do you?*

Miss Redfearne: *My mum came on a school trip and obviously she's Mrs Redfearne. They said, "That's the proper Mrs Redfearne." Because she as an adult, if I wasn't married//*

Miss Thomson: *Joseph said, "You're not married, are you? You've got no marriage ring. Why aren't you married?" And, he said, "You'll meet someone. When are you going to meet someone to get married? You'll meet someone eventually, like my mum and dad did." And off he went. And I felt like I'm getting counselling from Year 1s. All these questions are there, and they're trying to process it.*

Despite their professional status and their daily management of children's lives, marriage appears to be *the* marker against which children judged these young women. Until they married they would not reach true adulthood.

The children talked about having girlfriends and boyfriends. Some considered themselves to be in relationships. In Mick's case this was recognised and commented upon by the other participants drawn from Year 2. Sometimes the children identified each other as having a girlfriend or boyfriend or as loving another child; when this occurred the "accusation" caused embarrassment and were generally vehemently denied. For example:

Alan: *She [Charlotte] did say she was in love with Jake.*

TW: *Is that true?*

Charlotte: *No!*

TW: *You didn't say that.*

Alan: *You did.*

Mick: *You did say that to us.*

Charlotte: *I didn't.*

Mick: *Jake said.*

TW: *Oh, Jake said. So, hang on a minute. Jake said//*

Alan: *And Charlotte said to me.*

Mick: *Alan said to me.*

Similarly, Alan aggressively refuted Mick's statement that Rihanna was his girlfriend, despite Mick's continued insistence. Clearly, this was a sensitive subject among the children, suggesting that it should be addressed carefully when discussing relationships in a classroom context.

In focus group conversations Mick's father was the only adult to note children's 'romantic' relationships as a reason for addressing the issue in SRE.

Mr Ling: *I think in relation to, I mean there are two sides to this coin. You're talking about sex; what does a five-, six-, seven-year old think? What are they aware of? From my point of view, I don't want to go into the mechanics of the thing, because they aren't aware of it at that age. But the relationships side, I think they are aware. They're forming relationships themselves, anyway. Ours is always running around: "Yes, I've got a girlfriend!" So they're aware of this side, and I think that should be the emphasis, from my point of view.*

However, despite the importance that Mick placed upon his romance with Karen, and the conversations of other children, this was the only time Mr Ling mentioned this subject. This suggests either a genuine lack of awareness among the adults, something that seems particularly unlikely for the teachers, or a failure of adults to take children's romances seriously. While this might seem a sensible attitude from the adults' perspective, the dismissive approach to children's romantic lives negates their validity. It also fails to acknowledge that children are actively engaged in building their own gendered and sexual identities and means that they fail to recognise the impact of these relationships on the way they view themselves and are regarded by their peers. In terms of the SRE they receive, this also suggests that it is important for children to have the opportunity to learn about how to manage their emotions and negotiate their relationships

In this cohort of children there was no suggestion that girls were stigmatised for their involvement with or for liking / loving boys or, conversely, for their rejection of the playground romance narrative. Boys who were not actively interested in finding a girlfriend were consequently judged to be lacking in some way. However, a range of studies show that these children would likely be confronted with these attitudes in the not too distant future (Cowie and Lees 1981; Lees 1996; Renold 2005, 2007).

Despite a range of parenting approaches adopted by the adult participants, there was a strong trend toward the view that KS1 children should be taught about same-sex relationships to prevent them offending others, avoid confusion, and ensure they understand the relationships they see in their own lives and through

television representations. However, there was a significant lack of engagement with the idea that any of these adults' children might themselves be anything other than heterosexual, even from those with LGBT+ family members, and a downplaying of the importance of children's own relationships.

7.6 Gender stereotypes and compulsory heterosexuality

As a number of studies have shown, it is possible to deliberately challenge gender stereotypes, heterosexism and misogyny through the content and delivery of the curriculum (e.g. Allan *et al* 2010; DePalma and Atkinson 2009, 2010; Davies 1989b, 1993). However, the 'institutional arrangements' of schools and the wider society frequently work to counter the messages of these types of programmes (West and Zimmerman 1987: 146). Within schools the formal and informal arrangement of physical space, such as separate toilets for girls and boys, the placing of play equipment and playground markings, take for granted the gender binary of female and male. Similarly, social arrangements and casual social interactions, like asking children to form boys' lines and girls' lines, seating girls and boys alternately as a behaviour management strategy, and praising work or behaviour using phrases like 'good girl' and 'good boy', work to reinforce this dichotomy and support stereotypes (NUT 2013).

Specific expressions of gender and sexuality are also assumed and policed by children themselves. Matty and his older brother knew "the rules" and did not want to be seen to be engaging in gender transgressive behaviours. They were adamant that no one should find out that they enjoyed 'girls' films', like *Tangled* (2010), for to be associated with a "girls' entertainment" would also place them as

feminine. In conversations, children expressed a tension; they opined that anyone could be or do anything, but then backtracked with many caveats and assessments that in small but persistent ways positioned women as less than men. For example, the children in Alan's group all agreed when he asserted that, 'Men do the cooking; women shouldn't do the cooking.' He went on to explain that the reason for this was that women burn food whereas men do not. When Charlotte, who stated that 'men are better than women because they do better stuff', said that her father had burnt the toast that morning the children shifted their position, siding with Fred that view that 'It's nice when it's burnt.' Similarly, Miss Macintyre's acknowledgement that it is quite acceptable for girls to be tomboys, whereas boys who don stereotypical girls' clothing or engage in 'girls' activities' are looked down upon, speaks to an underlying assumption that masculine is superior to feminine.

Teachers recognised that they had themselves absorbed stereotypes. For example, Miss Peake reflected: 'We are that conditioned, aren't we, to think that as a girl I should play with that doll. And as a boy I should//.' Others, like Mrs Old (above) continued to express the view that there is an essential difference between girls and boys that is located in the body. Nonetheless, most who took part were rhetorically eager to address stereotypes with children and to defend those who broke with them.

Mr Hall: *I think we are educating them, but the deep roots of what their getting from home – those stereotypes can be very far ingrained. So that's the combat we've got in school.*

Mrs Brown: *That's why we get inappropriate language and stuff.*

Mr Hall: *Yes.*

Miss Young: *There'll use the word, like gay, but they don't really know what they're saying because they've heard it at home for someone who might be a bit girly, or whatever.*

Mrs Brown: *And that's when you've got to deal with those inappropriate . . . because they might just say it, might they. They might think it's okay to say that.*

However, some who took part in this study equated behaving in ways that transgressed stereotypes as an automatic indication of homosexuality. As demonstrated by Martino and Cumming-Potvin's (2014) case study of Tom, a white male elementary school teacher in Canada who self-identified as gay, it seems that the leap in thinking from boys breaking away from stereotypical behaviours to being gay is not uncommon. In his classroom, Tom employed mechanisms to achieve liberal aims around 'celebrating difference', e.g. using texts where girls were portrayed in non-traditional roles or that focused on families with two fathers (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014: 13). Despite this Tom exhibited a reluctance to use the book *My Princess Boy*, the story of a boy who enjoyed wearing dresses and a tiara, as a pedagogical text (Kilodavis and DeSimone 2010). Tom immediately read the Princess Boy's preferences as a sign of his gay sexuality rather than considering these to be alternative expressions of straight masculinity or trans-identity, for example. Rather than being willing to disrupt gender norms, Tom's assumption that the Princess Boy cannot be heterosexual highlighted and ultimately served to reinforce masculine stereotypes rather than to disrupt gender norms.

Teaching that seeks to trouble gender stereotypes needs careful construction and exploration. Teachers here were happy to accept that individuals might wish to express themselves in non-stereotypical ways, but the underlying assumption was that, for boys this would be an indication of non-straight sexuality. There seemed to be no equivalent assumption that a tomboy identity would equate to lesbian sexuality. Even if teachers are giving the message that LGBT+ identities are to be celebrated, these narrow perspectives on how identities are enacted means that individuals might shy away from non-conformist embodiments of gender and sexuality for fear of being positioned as Other.

No parents and only one group of teachers considered the position of LGBT+ teachers. They acknowledged that some parents would likely react very negatively should a teacher overtly present themselves as gay or lesbian. At the same time, some thought that this could be a positive way for both children, parents and teachers to develop understanding:

Mrs Brown: *The child goes home; you can hear what's going to be said: "My teacher's talking about his boyfriend." Father: "Pervert!" You can hear it. They automatically think there's something sinister. You can hear it. I think a lot of people would think there's something sinister with it. . .*

Mrs Harvey: *And it's down to personal experience. Because we've got some families who we might initially think they'd cause some trouble if there's mention of the word 'gay', but in fact if they had experience of it in their own family their view would be completely different.*

Mrs Brown: *Or if they had a teacher at that age, because it might take a generation to change//*

Miss Thomson: *It's almost like you've got to feed it up, isn't it?*

Mrs Brown: *You need to take the step, and then hopefully//*

Miss Peake: *Because if people don't have an awareness of it, then//*

Mr Mayall: *I think it's going to take a generation or two.*

Miss Thomson: *It's almost like you've got to teach the parents.*

Mr Mayall: *Even a few teachers as well, because as you say there are teachers who will think, "I would like to teach mum and dad, that's the basic family."*

Echoing Mr Mayall's observation, Miss Redfearne reflected upon her own feelings in this regard.

Miss Redfearne: *I don't know anyone who's gay, so I don't know how I would feel if my children came home and said, "My teacher's talked about his boyfriend." Maybe we have to overcome that as individuals. Just think, "This is something new. My child is getting a new experience." I don't know.*

These discussions might suggest that underneath these, often well-intentioned, pronouncements lay heterosexist assumptions: we are all heterosexuals here; we are normal; homosexuality is different / Other and should be understood and tolerated.

While none of the children in the study voiced homophobic opinions or language during the focus group sessions, speaking to parents and teachers revealed that

a small minority of those who took part were known to have done so in the past. However, the privileging of the heterosexual is itself sufficient to police the performance of gender within the school environment and beyond, silencing those who might sit outside of “acceptable” forms of femininity and masculinity (Preston 2016; Renold 2002, 2003; Ryan 2016). As Ryan (2016) reflected on her own work in a US school:

In times of whispered peer talk, ‘off-task’ chatter, creative writing activities, imaginary dramatic play and many others, heteronormative messages regularly circulate among children in elementary schools. Through their antigay talk and, more regularly, through their narratives and play that silence all but normative heterosexuality, children learn and perpetuate the idea that LGBT identities and practices are not normal, not acceptable and not valued. As children’s own discourses of (hetero)sexuality provide a significant mechanism through which heteronormativity is perpetuated, they are also an important part of what maintains non-equitable environments for LGBT students and those from LGBT-headed families. (Ryan 2016: 86-87)

The “common sense” heterosexist environment in which pupils existed at home and in school went unchallenged by the children who took part in this study. What was evident from their description of games and friendships was the power of the heterosexual matrix. These children did little to trouble stereotypes in their play. Indeed, most mixed-gender play resulted in borderwork that served to maintain

the *status quo* in terms of the relational construction of gender and sexual identity, and gender power relations (Thorne 1993).

7.7 Protecting childhood

Despite a range of reports and statements produced by government officials and other interested parties, and intense media attention on marketing and ‘inappropriate’ products aimed at children, none of the adult participants in this study expressed worries that their children were suffering as a consequence of these forces (Bailey 2011; Byron 2008; 2010; Papadopoulos 2010; Ross 2010; Wilson 2012; Wintour 2010). Parents did not describe children applying pressure on them to purchase goods that they considered unsuitable due to their “adult” nature, nor feeling that they had to give way to their children’s demands just because other parents had done so. Given the national climate of near moral panic at the time of these discussions, this might be thought of as somewhat surprising. It is also the case that the children in this study did not talk about their desire for particular types of clothing or toys of any kind. This was a subject that simply did not arise in their conversations.

It could be that parents and teachers were comfortable with the products aimed at children that they encountered, even types frequently portrayed as excessively adult or sexual in nature. They might simply see these as unthreatening. Alternatively, it could be the case that their own children were not interested in these types of products and so, while they might be more widely seen as problematic, for these adults this was somebody else’s problem and therefore not at the forefront of their minds when taking part in these discussions.

The children discussed the differences between girls and boys, but did not refer to clothing when they did so. None of these children spoke about aspiring to own clothing or toys because they had seen them advertised on television or in magazines, seen celebrities wearing them or because they were branded. It is also the case that, unlike some of the other KS1 children in the school, they usually appeared at school discos, parties and on non-uniform days in clothing that would typically be considered “innocent” or “age appropriate”. On these occasions, the boys would arrive in T-shirts, jeans and trainers. The girls would generally appear in pretty dresses or, like the boys, in jeans, a casual top and trainers or sandals. These children’s clothes were usually unbranded, purchased from local supermarkets and bore a marked similarity to one another.

What was more of a concern to participants in the parent focus groups was adult content of television programmes and the perceived threats that come from children engaging with the digital world. In 2012, most children watched television every day and it was their most popular ‘media activity’ (Ofcom 2012: 3). As such, it is unsurprising that parents found this medium especially troubling. While this persists in being a significant source of entertainment the nature of television-viewing has changed significantly over time, and there has been a shift toward children spending more of their time online (Ofcom 2016).

Despite their concerns, none of the parents indicated that there should be more regulation of television programming. Only Mrs Thomas claimed to prevent her

children from watching adult television programmes, an assertion that was backed-up by her sons who had differing opinions on their prescribed viewing.

John: *I don't even like CBBC. I have to watch CBBC.*

William: *I love it.*

To some extent these parents' views replicated those expressed on a national scale, with 77% of parents stating that they believe there is 'about the right amount of television regulation' (Ofcom 2016: 4). Rather than regulation, the adults shared the view that children should be educated (either by their parents or the school) to understand what they see on the television as a reflection of relationships and people they might encounter in their own lives.

In a time before streaming and YouTube gained a hold on home entertainment, these children reported enjoying a wide range of both children's and adult television programming and films, including *Phineas and Ferb*, *The Simpsons*, *Harry Potter*, *Bear Grylls*, and *Transformers*, alongside soap operas, *An Idiot Abroad* and *Benidorm*. Children's viewing habits were quite varied. Christopher claimed not to enjoy any adult programmes; Fred spent some time viewing with his dad (e.g. *Top Gear*); Alan watched soap operas and the horror series *The Waking Dead* with his parents, and Bobby cited *The Wedding Singer* as his favourite film, which was rated certificate 12 by the British Board of Film Classification for 'strong language' and 'moderate sex references' (BBFC n.d.). What also emerged was, that in some cases of shared viewing of adult-content television, children took the opportunity to ask their parents questions about what

they watched and some parents might have considered these occasions a teaching and learning opportunity.

Eliza: *Sometimes mum watches Eastenders and//*

TW: *Do you watch Eastenders with mum?*

Eliza: *Sometimes. And sometimes I watch Coronation Street.*

TW: *Do you like those kinds of programmes, Eliza?*

Eliza: *I like some of them. I like the one where they got married . . . I like the one where they got stuck in a fire in a house.*

TW: *That sounds horrible.*

Eliza: *I did like it, because I asked lots of questions of mum.*

TW: *What kinds of questions did you ask?*

Eliza: *Who are those people and what are they doing?*

TW: *Does your mum tell you all about the programmes when you're watching.*

Eliza: *Yes.*

An area of greater concern highlighted by parents was internet use. In 2012, the year these focus group interviews were undertaken, parent participants expressed similar concerns to those outlined by Ofcom in its *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report* (2012). Ofcom reported that 17% of parent respondents worried about the online content their children (aged 5-15) might access and 20% about who their children might 'be in contact with online'.

Those parent participants who expressed the greatest concerns and who often initiated discussion of the subject were those who had seen the possible dangers

of the internet close to or in their own homes. Ms Knight and Mrs Fellowes were both eager to address this subject. Ms Knight's niece had been the victim of online grooming and Mrs Fellowes' oldest daughter had been subjected to internet bullying by another girl in her class (see above). Ms Knight's experience led her to stop her children playing games and messaging via the internet:

I mean, it's so difficult with your children. They're coming home saying, "It's not fair; such-and-such goes on it and I want to chat to them." And you're saying, as a parent, "I don't care who's going on it, you're not." And you feel, you do feel mean.

Mrs Fellowes explained that, despite feeling torn, her response to her eldest daughter's situation was somewhat different:

And the child threatened to post all sorts of things about her online. I mean, it has been dealt with now at school, and she's happier. But, like I say, I don't really want her to go on it, but all her friends go on it, and it's difficult. You don't want to say, "You can't go on it. If you're going to get these kinds of messages we're going to have to think about it."

These conversations led other parents to express their fears for their children. In these discussions, the parents tended to see their children's engagement with the internet as directly threatening: as the home of predators, be they young or old. However, only Mrs Thomas had taken technical steps to ensure her sons' safety when using the computer, by putting limitations on the sites they could visit and

the amount of time they could go online. Some of the children were also allowed to play on sites with social networking features. In Year 1, Eliza, said that she sometimes played *Minecraft* with a friend of her older brother and Matty had played *Movie Star Planet* with people he knew in the real world. *Moshie Monsters* was a popular game among both the Year 1 and Year 2 children. Despite Elizabeth's older sister having been the subject of cyberbullying, she was the only child to admit to messaging people she did not know. None of the children had their own *Facebook* accounts, but one group of Year 2 children did talk about using their parents' accounts to play games with their parents' friends. Furthermore, some of these children had an online presence thanks to their parents uploading their images to *Facebook*. While the parents talked about the internet as a dangerous virtual world, they seemed to see it as a danger to children other than their own.

The teachers took a slightly different view. They saw children's access to the internet as a justification for teaching pupils about their bodies so they would not need to go searching on the web for information, and accidentally putting themselves in harm's way.

Miss Macintyre, participating in a teachers' group discussion, recalled an incident when an older girl had taken to the internet to find out about her own body.

Miss Macintyre: *I recently had to deal with a case, because of my ICT background, I had to deal with a case recently of a young girl taking photos of herself on a phone, and then looking at lesbians on the internet to find out what*

the bits of her vagina were. Erm, that was a girl who was 11. That was a couple of years ago, so she was in Year 6 at the time, and she was at that level where she was able to access the information herself. But she had taken pictures of herself on her phone//

Mrs Brown: *What? To find out what they were?*

Miss Macintyre: *Her mum was absolutely mortified because she had found out. This girl was just simply enquiring, she wasn't trying to do it for sex reasons. She just wanted to know.*

Mr Hall: *Yes.*

Miss Macintyre: *So, if you're getting to that point where children are risking, you know having an electronic copy photo, then perhaps you've got to say it's our duty to teach it before they need to do that and risk themselves in other ways.*

Children's safety in the real world was also an issue for parents. It became clear from discussions between the children and the adults that parents took steps to inform their children of the dangers of the world beyond school and home and, in some cases, to limit their exposure to potential dangers by ensuring their children did not stray too far unsupervised. For example, as noted above, Jeremy reported that his mother had told him it was 'too dangerous' to go outside when he had asked to visit friends. To Mick this seemed unreasonable:

I don't think it's fair that Jeremy isn't allowed out because I'm allowed to go onto my bike, onto the path that goes onto the main road. On my own.

However, Mick's perception of being 'on his own' was soon undercut when he admitted that he was allowed to ride his bike unaccompanied when his father was outside washing the car; presumably where he could see where Mick was going and what he was doing.

Some children, including Mick, were given limited freedom to roam.

Bobby: *My friend who lives on my estate. He lives about five blocks away, and we go to the park/*

Jeremy: _____ *Park.*

Bobby: *No. _____ Park.*

Nick: *Mick told me about that. And he said it's got four swings.*

Bobby: *It has two baby swings and two big swings.*

Nick: *And I live near a park. And me and Mick go down on it, and to go, by ourselves, and play there. And mummy and daddy give a time to come back, and I have my watch on so I know what time it is.*

Bobby was also allowed to visit his friends Helen and Kirsty. He explained: 'I have to ask first to go 'round their house, 'cause they live on a different estate.' This is not to say that when children did go out on their own that this was without incident. The problems children encountered on their excursions, however, seemed to come from other children rather than adults. For example, Bobby explained that on one of his trips to the park with Helen and Kirsty they had been bullied by older boys, which had provoked the girls' mother to 'go tell them off'.

Parents also found it hard to get the balance right when talking to their children about stranger danger.

Ms Knight: *You do try and keep them safe as much as you can. I mean, I always tell my girls about strangers. And one day we were walking back from the shop and they ran on ahead. I came 'round the corner to the back of the house, they're both crouched down by the car. "What are you doing?" "Mum, there's a stranger." I thought: god, I've scared them to death.*

Mrs Fellowes: *This is it. I mean, obviously you teach them about now talking to strangers, at school. But you don't want them to now talk to anybody. They have to see there are certain ways of not being touched and whatever.*

On the whole, these parents did not present themselves as paranoid (Furedi 2002). Their reactions to real or perceived threats were, at least rhetorically, measured. However, this is not to say they were entirely comfortable with giving their children free rein. For example, no matter how close they lived and no matter how many other children were walking to and from school, none of these children came to school independently. They were eager to have their children educated to both inform and protect them. Furthermore, the very fact of parental engagement with these focus groups indicates a significant level of engagement and concern with the lives of their children.

7.8 Conclusion

What emerges here is a good degree of consensus among the adults who took part in these focus groups. It is also evident that these parents held their children's

teachers in high regard, and that teachers were respectful of parents' rights and responsibilities. This, along with the prospect of a parent backlash, led teachers to support parents' prerogative to excuse their children from SRE. For the parents this meant the way forward was to work with the school to ensure they were happy with and well-informed about their children's SRE. However, the acceptance of the right to withdraw meant that parents' rights would always trump the needs of children, despite acknowledgements that some parents are ill-equipped to teach their children and that SRE could be used to counter social injustice.

Repeatedly, adults underestimated the resourcefulness of children and discounted their experiences. Teachers did tend to be more willing to accept that children had developed knowledge of subjects like pregnancy and relationships through their own experiences, and conversations with children demonstrated that they were correct to do so. They tended to be more confident and willing than parents to teach children about these, but this was not always the case. Resorting to images of children as innocents and lacking maturity enabled adults to dodge children's questions and avoid engaging with them about sensitive or challenging subjects. Yet, children repeatedly demonstrated curiosity and knowledge.

The power of compulsory heterosexuality and the impulse to regulate children's lives runs through all the discussions. Adults spoke about addressing stereotypes and challenging homophobia but repeatedly their words and actions mitigated against these aims. Similarly, children's view of the world was very much rooted in a heterosexist norm that privileged the masculine. Adults' desire to protect

children was not always carried through in to action and was not always welcomed by those children who saw their freedom restricted.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Girls persisted in playing on the bars despite the boys' efforts to disrupt their enjoyment with name-calling and physical aggression. Some of the girls, and their parents, had developed strategies to thwart the boys attempts to embarrass them:

Janet and Lily were playing on the bars. As they whooped with delight, swinging themselves round at speed, Dominic and Sam grabbed the girls' skirts and pulled them over their heads. Rather than exposing the girls' underwear they revealed the shorts the girls wore for protection. This was not the first time the boys had struck, but this time the girls were prepared.

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has explored a small group of young children's understanding of their developing gender and sexual identities, the gendered (heterosexist) social environment they occupy, and their lived experienced of these. It has also sought to examine adult opinions of what KS1 children should learn in SRE, and the extent to which their rationale is consistent with children's knowledge, experiences and needs.

Focus group interviews with parents and teachers were used to expose adults' views about the possible content of an SRE programme of study for KS1 children. Their purpose was also to provide the means to evaluate the degree to which

these teachers' and parents' perspectives on gendered and sexual development coincided with children's experiences, knowledge and attitude, the underlying idea being that whatever children are taught will only be useful and productive if we begin from the point of children's prior knowledge and understanding, as with any other subject in the curriculum.

Throughout the research process I have assumed that children are competent beings with the ability to reflect upon their own lives and what they see around them. The aim here has been to allow children to articulate their experiences and perspectives and to value their utterances as authentic representations. Children consistently showed that they possess a sophisticated understanding of the world around them. At times, their understanding might well be different from that of adults; nonetheless it carries real meaning and forms the foundation of children's social interactions and their active construction of gender and sexual identities. The children demonstrated a high degree of self-awareness and an ability to make decisions purposively, for example, not participating in certain games or playing with particular children because they were aware of the potential negative consequences. They also showed a consciousness of their own social position. Jeremy, for example, acknowledged that he would decisively insert himself into other children's games when he knew he would not be their first choice of playmate.

The focus on one school means that the data and the conclusions drawn from this piece of research cannot be viewed as universally applicable. This was a snapshot in time of a small group of children, parents and teachers from a primary school in

the Midlands. The views expressed by participants might not even coincide with those of others from the same setting at the same time. Nonetheless, it was hoped that for the adults the experience of participation might lead those individuals to consider more carefully their words and actions when interacting with children. In the case of teachers, the hope was to lead to a deeper interrogation of curriculum content, classroom practice, and school ethos and organisation. For parent participants, the focus group presented an opportunity to discuss issues usually considered to be a part of the private sphere, allowing deep reflection on the way they interacted with their children and their children's schooling. For the children, this was a relatively rare occasion when they could do much to set the agenda of conversations with an adult, and openly explore their thoughts on gender and sexuality. Ultimately, it was hoped that this would provide a genuine opportunity for them to contribute to curriculum design.

Some participants' views evolved through the focus group interview process and individuals did grapple with contradictory perspectives. It was my hope that participation in this research might itself lead to a small tremor in the heterosexual matrix. However, this is not to say that this experience was truly transformative in any great measure, nor that all participants spoke completely freely. For example, when children were asked the difference between boys and girls there was much giggling among the Year 1 children and Nick was clear that he knew the difference but was reluctant to articulate these among his peers. It was evident that the children recognised that some of the subjects they were addressing were not usually open to them within the public sphere of the school. Nevertheless, it is hoped that some of the conversations contained here and the findings that are

drawn from these interviews will resonate with readers and lead them in turn to examine policy and practice in the education system.

8.2 Findings

8.2.1 Young children's gender and sexual identities are constructed within the heterosexual matrix

Despite neo-liberal rhetoric proclaiming girls' academic achievements as a success story, children's conversations regarding gender roles and stereotypes were suffused with the notion that men were superior to women. What they presented was a deficit model of the feminine while simultaneously proclaiming that girls and boys / women and men 'can do anything'. While both girls and boys could be 'good at' the same things in class, for example maths or writing, in their play the gender divide was more evident. Girls could play ice monsters under certain conditions: the name of the game changed to *princess* ice monsters, and girls could not be a king or a soldier.

The children's perspectives on adult gender roles were complex and full of contradictions, something recognised by the children themselves. They initially declared that men and women can have the same jobs. However, when they began to interrogate this idea certain conditions emerged. When discussing employment none of the children explored the possibility of inserting men into professions traditionally regarded as female. Just as girls could only participate in the game of ice monsters under certain conditions, women could be in the navy but 'they might get hurt, or they might do something wrong' so they could only perform less dangerous roles. Even Bobby's assertion that 'girls are usually the medic' (a role that adults would usually regard as high status) was stated in a way

that undermined the value of the role. 'Girls' could be the medic because they are not brave or strong, should not be using guns and could only perform a role with the permission of the (presumably male) captain. In both the playground and employment, the feminine was positioned as both lesser and potentially dangerous: girls and women might cause harm to themselves and others through their deficient natures.

The children's expressed gender and sexual identities reflected an unquestioned binary framework; they clearly located themselves within the heterosexual matrix. These children did, however, differ from those described in other studies (e.g. Connolly 1998, Renold 2002). The girls who participated in this research did not exhibit hypersexualised versions of girlhood. The pretty princess, 'nice' girly-girl was an idealised manifestation of girlhood to which most of these girls aspired (Paechter 2010). It was not, however, the only way of doing girl available or practiced by the girls at BCP. These girls would individualise their uniforms, frequently appearing with varnished nails, plastic rings, bracelets and flamboyant adornments in their hair (see Epstein and Johnson 1998). On non-uniform days and for after school celebrations most would appear in pretty party dresses. Even those, like Rihanna and Elizabeth, who would more often arrive in a t-shirt and jeans, would subvert their tomboy image by retaining elements of a princess aesthetic with extravagantly decorated headbands.

The boys in this study were not among those who derived their masculine identities from a violent, physically assertive, 'laddish' persona. Despite some being members of the school football team, they would not even be described as

especially 'sporty'. Even Bobby, the boy most likely to raise the ire of his teachers for his poor classroom behaviour, propensity to engage in physical encounters on the playground and occasional use of offensive language, was a far cry from a 'little tough' (Connolly 1998). Most of these boys explicitly rejected the hegemonic form of masculinity within the context of BCP and distanced themselves from the hegemonic boys.

In their discussions, children rhetorically acknowledged the possibility of border crossing with their rhetoric of 'anyone can do anything'. These children often played in mixed groups of girls and boys, two of the boys identified girls as their best friends, but the nature of their games often served to reinforce rather than disrupt gendered power relations and identities. As Matty's secret enjoyment of *Tangled* (2010) demonstrates, the reality is that most children quickly learn and outwardly comply with the rules and regulations of the heterosexist micro-communities of the playground and classroom. Indeed, the girls were at pains to retain feminine signifiers for themselves; they did not want their girlhood 'invaded' by the boys. Pamper parties and pink nail varnish were for girls. Boys would have to make do with something less glamorous or feminine.

8.2.2 Children engage and invest in 'romantic' relationships

Within a heteronormative framework, girl / boyfriend relationships were important to this group of children. Unlike children in Connolly's study (1998), they viewed these very much in romantic terms, and sometimes talked about marriage in the future. This was particularly the case for the boys. Even those in Year 1 who hoped for multiple partners talked about them in terms of liking or loving rather

than in terms of physical attributes or behaviours. The boys did not refer to prospective girlfriends, or girls generally, in derogatory terms at all during these focus group sessions. They did not exhibit the sexual double standards that are characteristic in studies of children elsewhere (Connolly 1998, Renold 2005).

Children regarded their own relationships as having authentic meaning. They were genuinely emotionally invested in them, be they actual or desired. Girlfriend–boyfriend relationships were integral to the children’s construction of their gender and sexual identities and they derived status among their peers as a result of their involvement with a member of the opposite sex. It seemed that even identifying other children or being identified as a potential girlfriend or boyfriend was enough for these children to gain a degree of status by discursively inserting themselves into a heteroromantic, adult narrative. Despite this, the adults tended to be rather dismissive or completely ignore the existence of these relationships.

Within their peer group, Mick and Karen’s relatively unusual relationship was particularly important in that it had some characteristics more akin to those of older primary school children (Renold 2005). This was a longstanding pairing; Mick and Karen would spend playtimes together as part of a larger friendship group and were open with their parents and teachers about its existence. This was the type of partnership to which some other children, like Rihanna, aspired. At times, it seemed that this was a proxy relationship for many of the children in Year 2 who lived out their romantic lives through Karen and Mick’s relationship; they could gain much of the pleasure with none of the pain this way.

Only a small number of children had girlfriends or boyfriends. Most positioned themselves as prospective heterosexual partners, a few dismissed the idea until they were older or were silent during discussions of who liked whom. Whilst Renold's (2006) study found that children struggled to sustain a girl-boy friendships without the looming insinuation of a possible romantic relationship, this was not the case here. None of the children touched upon the possibility of same-sex relationships, either for themselves or in the context of family and friends.

Despite the significance of these relationships, among the adults only Mick's father even acknowledged their existence within the focus group sessions. Perhaps recognising these would be regarded by parents as admitting that their children were sexual beings inserting themselves into the adult world. This might too impact on their conceptions of themselves as good parents with innocent children.

8.2.3 Parents tenaciously cling to the discourse of innocence and heterosexuality in relation to their own children

Parents frequently spoke of the need to educate their children to be equipped to understand their social world. They worried about things their children might see and find troubling or confusing, sharing experiences of what children had seen on television or in the street that had prompted them to raise questions that parents sometimes felt uncomfortable or ill-equipped to deal with. They recounted episodes when their children had been curious, interrogated them about sexual matters and relationships, and talked about a range of family structures and sexual identities that their children had experienced.

There was a strong need for parents to retain children's innocence, which was demonstrated by explaining that their children were naïve or lacked interest in the sexual and therefore were not ready for sex education. This was the foundation of their arguments for withholding information from children and meant they could avoid potentially embarrassing and difficult conversations with their children. Simultaneously, some parents worried that 'too much' information would even provoke children (girls) into action in order to satisfy their curiosity, although what they meant by 'action' was never clarified. No-one identified the contradictions in the arguments they presented.

Alongside seeing them as innocents, when parents discussed their own children and the futures they envisaged for them what they presented was a heterosexual narrative. Furthermore, those who explicitly outlined their hopes for the trajectory of their children's lives wanted them to form lasting heterosexual relationships, marry, and have children; they hoped for what they saw as a "traditional" future and family. There was no hint of the possibility that their children, or even other children might identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Only one parent raised the question of gender dysphoria, but very much at a distance from her own daughters.

Some adult participants were both teachers and parents. For most, the role of teacher was carried over into their parenting. They were more comfortable responding to questions, and more proactive in their approach to children learning about sex and relationships. Some, by implication, even acknowledged the possibility that their children might identify as gay or lesbian. However, a small

number of teachers felt more confident and comfortable in their professional role, seeing their own children as innocents who needed protection from too much knowledge.

It might well have been the case that parents did not want to admit to sharing sexual knowledge with their children because they might be seen as bad parents by others, like the mother in Davies and Robinson's (2010) study. In a society that discursively locates children as nonsexual, young people who gain sexual knowledge and experience are positioned as either sexually precocious or victims. In each case this would likely lead to censure of the parents. Perhaps those parents who clung most desperately to the discourse of innocence and heterosexuality saw these characteristics as signifiers of "good" children and as of themselves as "good" parents; their own identities might well have rested upon this characterisation of their children. This also served to reinforce the adult / child binary in which the power rested with the parents.

8.2.4 Teachers see children as lacking maturity rather than as innocents

Teachers were less inclined to talk about children as innocents than the parent participants. Their professional encounters with pupils tended to mean that they thought far more in terms of children's capabilities to understand and engage in learning. They recognised that children gained pleasure from their bodies and regarded this as distracting and something that should be confined to the private sphere. They also acknowledged that they had witnessed children abusing one another by using terms like *gay* and *lesbian*.

Teachers invoked a discourse of maturity (especially in reference to boys) rather than one of innocence to justify limitations of access to information and preferred pedagogy. Unlike the parents, however, they openly identified some of the contradictions contained in their arguments. They noted that they were potentially applying their own adult perspectives to children's lives, thereby distorting meaning. They also realised that they were treating SRE in a very different way to that of any other subject. For example, they sometimes suggested that they would only want to move learning forward for children who asked questions and demonstrated curiosity; they would not elicit children's prior knowledge and understanding; they would teach girls and boys separately to maintain a manageable classroom and male teachers would teach the boys and female teachers would teach the girls. They also thought it was entirely acceptable for parents to withdraw their children from these lessons; the parents' rights and responsibilities came first.

8.2.5 Parents and teachers share attitudes about the purpose and teaching of SRE

Parents and teacher groups both expressed anxieties about their own knowledge and ability to transact sex and relationships education. Both groups also rooted this lack of confidence in their own experiences within the education system (for teachers this included their teacher training and ongoing professional development) and in their upbringings. Despite this, participants in the parents' groups expressed a high degree of both trust and confidence in their children's teachers.

The adults were happy to have gender stereotypes explored through SRE, but there was no real discussion of the possibility of a significant disruption of gendered or sexual power relations. As well as providing children with information to enable them to navigate the social world, many of the adults regarded education as a tool for reducing prejudice. Some, for example, likened homophobia to racism, seeing both as unacceptable and a mindset that should and could be challenged and undermined through SRE. They regarded words like *gay* and *lesbian* as unpleasant when used as terms of abuse but did not take children's intent particularly seriously. They felt children did not really understand what they were saying. They failed to recognise, as Stonewall's surveys have repeatedly demonstrated, the long-term consequences of this type of behaviour for all pupils who suffer this kind of abuse, but particularly for those who come from LGBT+ families or self-identify as such (Guasp 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014). However, the teachers did try to unpick what this kind of abuse really meant and grappled with how to deal with it effectively.

There was overwhelming support for parents to be able to withdraw their children from SRE; the only dissenter being Mrs Old. Most parents who supported the right to withdraw did so because they thought it would make life easier for teachers. If parents did not agree with what was being taught the way to avoid conflict was to allow children to be removed from lessons. The teachers drew heavily on a parents' rights discourse. Even if they did not agree with parents' views, it was their right to decide what their children should learn in this context. Both parents and adults agreed on this provision, despite presenting the counter argument that those children most likely to be withdrawn were least likely to receive an equivalent

education at home. They also recognised the probability that children would hear about the content of SRE lessons from peers and be exposed to all sort of other information (often erroneous) from older siblings and children on the playground. Repeatedly they put the rights of the parent above those of the child in terms of SRE.

8.3 Impact on the school

In the two years following the focus group sessions I continued to at the school. During that time, I saw a number of issues addressed in focus groups become topics of discussion for the teachers of BCP. While the school's written policies around bullying and behaviour went unchanged, it was evident from conversations in the staffroom and in corridors that teachers were considering their own practice in a more reflective way. They often wondered aloud, in ways that they would not have previously, about whether they had dealt with incidents of homophobic name calling and sexual harassment in an effective manner. They seemed much less eager to brush aside the use of the term 'gay'. Some of the teachers began to move away from using gender as an organisational tool and talked about a change in the way they allocated tasks to children. These were not big institutional changes, but they did reflect a raising of consciousness around issues of gender inequality and reinforcing of stereotypes.

In addition to the established PSHE curriculum, the staff decided that the school would go ahead and begin to introduce SRE for children throughout KS1 and KS2. Rather than initially introducing SRE to every class, the plan was that it should be

retained in Years 5 and 6 and for it to be additionally introduced into KS1. The teachers concluded that the best way forward would be for the teaching to be introduced to each year group as the children moved up through school. As the first group of Year 2 children to have received SRE moved into Year 3 the subject would simultaneously be introduced to the Year 3 curriculum and so on as the children moved through the school. The curriculum was based on The Christopher Winter Project's (2009) scheme of work, with minor adjustments to take account of some of the teachers' and parents' concerns that had been expressed during the focus group sessions, while providing an increased focus on gender and sexual identity (for example, the term 'gay' was introduced to the children in Year 2 and same sex relationships were discussed when children explored different types of families).

With the support of the headteacher and governors, the school began teaching SRE to KS1 children in the summer term of 2013. By then, it was argued, teachers would be aware of any issues they needed to take account of in their lessons and they would have built solid relationships with parents. A letter was sent to parents informing them that the school was about to start teaching SRE in KS1 and outlining some of the key themes the unit of work would address. They were invited to pose questions and given the option to request their children be removed from lessons. The school did not seek permission to teach the subject as some others in the area had previously done. In fact, few parents raised objections to the curriculum. Some did ask about the content and mode of delivery of sessions and in these instances the fears of most were allayed and children attended SRE lessons. Nonetheless, a few children were withdrawn, including Mrs Paxton's

children. Across the four KS1 classes, the school arranged alternative provision for six children from four families. In line with the views expressed in the focus groups, the school ensured that SRE took place in a regular slot each week and that parents were informed what would be covered in each lesson so they could then follow up on issues at home if they wanted to. In the first year of teaching there were no complaints from parents and in the following years staff have indicated a drop in the number of children withdrawn and a growing confidence among teachers in the delivery of SRE lessons.

8.4 Implications for policy and practice

Adults' opinion that parents should have the last say over whether or not their children attend SRE lessons is currently being somewhat undermined with the move toward statutory, renamed, Relationships Education in primary schools in September 2020 (DfE 2018a). In its *Changes to the teaching of Sex and Relationships Education and PSHE* document the DfE states:

We have committed to retaining a parent's right to withdraw their child from sex education within RSE (other than sex education in the National Curriculum as part of science), but not from relationships education at primary. This is because we believe parents should have the right to teach sex education themselves in a way which is consistent with their values. (DfE 2017; 5-6)

This is particularly significant in that this requirement will extend to academies, free and faith schools.

This is an important shift in terms of the rights of children at primary level. It is, however, the case that schools will have a potentially challenging web of statutory relationships education and national curriculum science alongside non-statutory PSHE and sex education to unravel. This may lead schools to be cautious and refrain from any additional sex education. The acknowledgement by the adults in this study that children are exploring and building their sexual identities, and are gaining pleasure from their bodies, alongside what the children have articulated about their own knowledge and understanding, suggests that this would represent a significant and serious gap in children's education.

The discourse of innocence and taboos around talking about sex in the public sphere do a disservice to children. These serve to exclude them from "adult" knowledge and perpetuate the view that any expression of sexuality is a sign of abuse or promiscuity, especially when considering girls. This perpetuates a situation where pleasure is denied, particularly for girls and LGBT+ pupils, and where the double standard of 'slags' or 'drags' is institutionally applied to girls and young women (Cowie and Lee 1981). The insistence on children's naïvety means that SRE is isolated from the rest of the curriculum and that information is provided on a "need to know" basis. Following this model, children should only be taught if they are curious, ask questions and are mature enough. There is a genuine contradiction here; children who ask questions are sometimes seen as precocious or provocative, and their curiosity not valued but dismissed as inappropriate.

Everything about this attitude to the teaching of SRE runs counter to the educational philosophy of most teachers. This needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

As others have asserted, schools need to examine their role in promoting a heterosexual norm (for example, Davies 1989b, 1993; DePalma and Atkinson 2010; Alldred and David 2007; Renold 2005). Both practice and curriculum continually reinforce a gender binary that serves to homogenise girls and boys, subordinate the feminine, and delineate LGBT+ adults and children as Other. This continues despite rhetoric and legislation to combat prejudice and promote equality. I argue, therefore, that the structure, routines and curriculum of schools all need to be interrogated and reformed. Schools should, I propose, acknowledge that children are actively engaged in constructing their own gender and sexual identities and “sexual” relationships. They are also bullying one another, using gender and sexuality as a basis for that abuse.

The requirement within the new Draft Guidance for schools to ‘ensure that the policy meets the needs of pupil and parents and reflects the community they serve’ is in some ways problematic (DfE 2018a: 8). The assumption that ‘the community’ is easily defined, homogeneous, that it does not contain conflicting viewpoints and that all members (including parents) are reasonable and well-informed is, perhaps, misguided. This is not to say that a school’s community and parents are not important, but that community wishes should not be a starting point. Rather, I contend, policymakers, those who design the curriculum and schools need to start with children.

I am convinced that, the school curriculum must start from the point of children's *current* lives rather than from a position of just preparing them for the "real" adult lives that await them. To do this, teachers will need to elicit children's knowledge, understand and gather accounts of their experiences, and build from here rather than from an abstract notion of what young children should be. I also propose that there needs to be a significant shift in the tenor of SRE, encouraging children to think critically and differently about identity relationships so that diversity becomes both a genuine possibility and valued within the school community and beyond. So too do schools need to question gender-based power relations that restrict the lives of both girls and boys.

With this in mind, there is still much work to be done to understand the gendered and sexual lives of young children. Further work, akin to that of Renold (2005), employing an observational approach to uncover children's gender and sexual relationships would represent an important next step in this research. Furthermore, a longitudinal study of the impact of the formulation of a programme of study with a feminist social justice agenda, taking children's lived experiences and understandings as a starting point, would help us to understand the potential for this kind of approach to teaching SRE in the primary school.

SRE of the type outlined above poses many challenges for schools and teachers. Those that wish to take this approach need the support of parents and the ability to elicit children's understanding of gender and sexual identities, and their experiences of gender power relationship dynamics. Given that, this research may

serve as a starting point for schools wishing to introduce a progressive, feminist form of SRE. At BCP, speaking to the children provided a basis from which to work when formulating an SRE curriculum and a justification for the inclusion of some curriculum content. Using focus groups also allowed parents and teachers to consider issues in new ways and collaboratively come to some consensus of the ways forward for SRE at BCP. They began to open-up the possibilities for what SRE could be.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Transcript key

---	brief pause
//	when one speaker is interrupted by another
(comment)	additional information, e.g. body movements
???	inaudible
. . .	when material is edited out
<i>italics</i>	emphasis added to a word or phrase
“ . . . ”	a quotation within a transcript
* * * * *	the following transcript is from another part of the interview or another focus group

Appendix 2: Ethics Approval Letter



K E E L E
UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC SERVICES
RESEARCH AND ENTERPRISE

14 December 2011

Ms Tracey Wire
21 Sandringham Drive
Wistaston
Crewe
Cheshire

Dear Tracey

Re: 'Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities'

Thank you for submitting your revised project for review.

I am pleased to inform you that your project has been approved by the Ethics Review Panel.

If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated in your application (July 2012) you must notify the Ethical Review Panel via Michele Dawson.

If there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to Michele Dawson. This form is available from Michele (01782 733588) or via <http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/>

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact Michele Dawson in writing to m.dawson@uso.keele.ac.uk

Yours sincerely

Dr Nicky Edelstyn
Chair – Ethical Review Panel

CC RI Manager, Supervisor

Appendix 3: Letter to the Headteacher and Governors

Dear Headteacher and Governors,

I am writing to request your support for my Ph.D. research project entitled 'Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities'.

Background

Currently the Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) programme of study is under review, both within the school and at a national level. There is guidance available to schools regarding the content of SRE, but this is less clear than in other areas of the curriculum and non-statutory in nature.

The National Curriculum requires that over the course of children's primary school Science lessons they:

develop confidence in talking, listening and thinking about feelings and relationships; are able to name parts of the body and describe how their bodies work; can protect themselves and ask for help and support; and are prepared for puberty (DFEE 2000:19).

Obviously there is more to SRE than this and the nuances of what is involved and how it should be taught are complex. Furthermore, while guidance issued in January 2010 advises schools to take into account cultural differences when drawing-up a SRE scheme of work, it fails to account for children's pre-existing knowledge or their own gendered and sexual perceptions and behaviours. This is unusual both in terms of the curriculum as a whole and surely necessary if SRE is to be genuinely useful.

The Research Proposal

This research will help address a number of questions:

What do parents of Year 1 and 2 children want their children to be taught in SRE?

What are teachers' views of what is appropriate for this age group?

What prior knowledge do children bring to the classroom and what are their perceptions of appropriate gender roles?

Any really useful and accepted SRE must take all of these viewpoints into account – no easy task – and while traditionally teachers' and parents' positions have been vocalized, and secondary pupil's views sought out (for example via the National Children's Bureau, UK Youth Parliament and Brook Advisory Service) it is rare to hear from such young children on the subject.

In order to elicit the perspectives of these groups it is proposed that a number of focus groups be established in the school. I am proposing that teachers and parents will form small groups to answer questions about and discuss their views

of SRE in general, and of a commercially produced SRE programme in particular. Simultaneously small groups of children will be invited to discuss their experiences and perceptions of relationships and gender roles both in and out of school.

Participants will be recruited through the school on a voluntary basis, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. All participants will have full information regarding the purpose of the project, be given the opportunity to withdraw from the process at any point and parental consent will be sought. Finally all data will be retained securely until which time that it may be safely destroyed.

The findings of this study should prove to be beneficial to the school and put [The School] at the forefront in the delivery of a well-constructed and accepted SRE programme for its KS1 children. Furthermore, these finding could have a wider application in furthering our understanding of KS1 children's perceptions of gender and relationships both in and out of school and the development of a widely acceptable and truly beneficial SRE programme for 5 – 7 year olds based on children's own prior knowledge and perceptions.

Thank you for considering my request and I hope that you will give it your full support.

Regards,

Dr. Tracey Wire

Appendix 4: Initial Letter to Parents / Carers

Distributed on headed paper.

Dear Parent / Carer,

I am currently undertaking a Ph.D. research project looking at the ways Sex and Relationship Education is taught and children's understanding of what it means to be a boy or girl. This research coincides with the school's rewriting of its Sex and Relationship Education lessons for Years 1 and 2.

We understand that this is an area of concern for many parents and would like to give you and your son / daughter the opportunity to take part in research that would help us to produce sets of lessons best suited to the children in our school.

Please complete the slip below to let us know if you would like more information about this project or speak to me if you would like to discuss any questions you may have.

Thank you for your support.

Regards,

Tracey Wire
Year 2 Teacher, PSHCE Support Co-ordinator

I would / would not be interested in receiving more information about the Sex and Relationship Education Research Project.

Name of child _____ Class _____

Name of Parent / Carer _____

Signed _____ Date _____

Appendix 5: Parents' Information Sheet

Information Sheet (Parents)

Study Title: Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities

Aims of the Research

This research project has been established to examine a number of questions related to the production of a programme of study in Sex and Relationship Education for Years 1 and 2 children. As part of the process I am hoping to ascertain the views of parents on this matter.

The research is being undertaken for a Ph.D. project. As well as contributing to my doctoral research it is hoped that the research will be of use to the school by making a significant contribution to the school's approach to teaching Sex and Relationship Education.

Invitation

You are being invited to consider taking part in the research study 'Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities'. This project is being undertaken by Tracey Wire.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information.

Why have I been invited?

As a parent / carer of a KS1 child at the school your opinions and concerns regarding your children's educational needs are highly valued, as such you have been invited to take part in this study.

Do I have to take part?

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign two consent forms. One is for you to keep and the other is for our records. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving reasons.

Please note that if you decide to take part you are not obliged in any way to give permission for your child to participate in this study.

What will happen if I take part?

If you agree to take part you will be asked attend two focus group meetings in which issues related to Sex and Relationship Education will be discussed.

If I take part, what do I have to do?

If you take part you will be asked to take part in an initial small group discussion regarding your views on Sex and Relationship Education for children in Key Stage 1. You will be asked to express your views on what you feel should and should not be

taught to children in this age group and to explain your opinions. This will occur within a small group (5 or 6) of parents at the school. There will then be a follow-up meeting in which you will be asked to look at and evaluate a commercially produced programme of Sex and Relationship Education for this age group. Meetings will take place after school, and will be 45 – 60 minutes long.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?

The main benefit of taking part is that you will have the opportunity to express your views, to assess potential materials and to have your opinions taken into consideration when the final plans for the Sex and Relationship Education study programme is drawn up.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part?

There are no foreseeable risks in your participation in the research project.

I do however have to work within the confines of current legislation over such matters as privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights and so offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law. For example in circumstances whereby I am made aware of future criminal activity, abuse either to yourself or another (i.e. child or sexual abuse) or suicidal tendencies I must pass this information to the relevant authorities.

How will information about me be used?

Discussions will be audio recorded, with additional notes being taken during discussion sessions as a back-up. The data will help the school produce a programme of study in Sex and Relationship Education for Years 1 and 2.

Who will have access to information about me?

At no time will you be identified by name, either within the school or within the final research material. The researcher (Tracey Wire) will be the only person to retain such information and in line with the Data Protection act will securely store any electronic information on a password protected computer and memory stick, while any paperwork related to the interviews will remain in a locked filing cabinet. This data will be retained for at least five years and will eventually be securely disposed of.

Who is funding and organising the research?

This research has the support of the school and of Keele University. This is a self-funded PhD research project.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak to the researcher(s) who will do their best to answer your questions you should contact Tracey Wire on t.wire@ippm.keele.ac.uk. Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact the researcher(s) you may contact Nicola Leighton, Research Governance Officer on 01782 733306 or n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:

Nicola Leighton
Research Governance Officer
Research & Enterprise Services
Dorothy Hodgkin Building

Keele University
ST5 5BG
E-mail: n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk
Tel: 01782 733306

How do I agree to take part?

Please complete the consent form below and return it directly to me (Tracey Wire), your child's class teacher or the school office.

Contact for further information

Tracey Wire at t.wire@ippm.keele.ac.uk.

Appendix 6: Teachers' Information Sheet

Distributed on headed paper.

Dear

Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities

As you are aware, I am currently undertaking a Ph.D. research project looking at the ways Sex and Relationship Education is taught and children's understanding and experiences of what it means to be a boy or girl. This research coincides with the school's rewriting of its Sex and Relationship Education lessons for Years 1 and 2.

I understand that this is an area that many people have strong views about, both as parents and teachers, and would like to invite you to take part in the project.

Please read this information sheet carefully. Feel free to discuss this with friends and relatives and should you have any questions please talk to me.

Information Sheet (Teachers)

Study Title: Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities

Aims of the Research

This research project has been established to examine a number of questions related to the production of a programme of study in Sex and Relationship Education for Years 1 and 2 children. As part of the process I am hoping to ascertain the views of primary school teachers on this matter.

The research is being undertaken for a Ph.D. project. As well as contributing to my doctoral research it is hoped that the research will be of use to the school by making a significant contribution to the school's approach to teaching Sex and Relationship Education.

Invitation

You are being invited to consider taking part in the research study 'Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities'. This project is being undertaken by Tracey Wire.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if

you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information.

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited to participate in this research because your views as a teaching professional are valued in the school's production of a Sex and Relationship Education Scheme of work for Key Stage 1 children.

Do I have to take part?

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign two consent forms, one is for you to keep and the other is for our records. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving reasons.

What will happen if I take part?

If you agree to take part you will be asked to attend two focus group meetings in which issues related to Sex and Relationship Education will be discussed.

If I take part, what do I have to do?

If you take part you will be asked to take part in an initial small group discussion regarding your views on Sex and Relationship Education for children in Key Stage 1. You will be asked to express your views on what you feel should and should not be taught to children in this age group and to explain your opinions. This will occur within a small group of teachers at the school. There will then be a follow-up meeting in which you will be asked to look at and evaluate a commercially produced programme of Sex and Relationship Education for this age group.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?

The main benefit of taking part is that you will have the opportunity to express your views, to assess potential materials and to have your opinions taken into consideration when the final plans for Sex and Relationship Education study programme is drawn up.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part?

There are no foreseeable risks in your participation in the research project.

How will information about me be used?

Discussions will be audio recorded, with additional notes being taken during discussion sessions as a back-up. The data will help the school produce a programme of study in Sex and Relationship Education for Years 1 and 2.

Who will have access to information about me?

At no time will you be identified by name within the final research material. In line with the Data Protection Act any electronic information will be stored on a password protected computer and memory stick, while any paperwork related to the interviews will remain in a locked filing cabinet. This data will be retained for

at least five years and will eventually be securely disposed of. However, you should be aware that anonymity of responses cannot be guaranteed.

Who is funding and organising the research?

This research has the support of the school's Headteacher and Governors, and of Keele University and is funded by the researcher Tracey Wire.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak to the researcher(s) who will do their best to answer your questions you should contact Tracey Wire on t.wire@ippm.keele.ac.uk. Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact the researcher(s) you may contact Nicola Leighton, Research Governance Officer on 01782 733306 or n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:

Nicola Leighton
Research Governance Officer
Research & Enterprise Services
Dorothy Hodgkin Building
Keele University
ST5 5BG
E-mail: n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk
Tel: 01782 733306

Contact for further information

Tracey Wire at t.wire@ippm.keele.ac.uk.

Appendix 7: Teachers and Parents' Consent Forms

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities

Name of Investigator: Tracey Wire

Please tick box

- | | | |
|---|--|--------------------------|
| 1 | I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 | I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 | I agree to take part in this study. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 | I understand that data collected about me during this study will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 | I agree to the focus group being audio recorded. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 | I agree to be contacted about possible participation in future research projects. | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

CONSENT FORM
(for use of quotations)

Title of Project: Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities

Name of Investigator: Tracey Wire

- | box | | Please tick |
|------------|--|--------------------------|
| 1 | I agree for any quotations to be used | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 | I don't want any quotations to be used | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 | I want to see any proposed quotations before making a decision | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix 8: Information Sheet for Parents of Child Participants

Information Sheet

(For parents of child participants)

Study Title: Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities

Aims of the Research

This research project has been set up to look a number of questions related to the way Sex and Relationship Education is taught in Years 1 and 2. As part of the process I am hoping to uncover children's understanding of what it is to be a boy / girl, man / woman and of the relationships they see everyday, both in and out of school.

As well as contributing to the school's approach to teaching Sex and Relationship Education, the research undertaken will form the basis of a PhD research project on the subject.

Invitation

Your child is being invited to take part in the research study 'Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities'. This project is being undertaken by Tracey Wire.

Before you decide whether or not you wish your child to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information.

Why has your child been invited?

Your son / daughter has been chosen to participate in this research because as a child in Key Stage 1 their understanding of the world around them is important when considering what and how they should be taught.

Does my child have to take part?

You are free to decide whether you wish your child to take part or not. If you do decide they can take part you will be asked to sign two consent forms. One is for you to keep and the other is for our records. You are free to withdraw your consent for this study at any time and without giving reasons. Your child will also be free to withdraw from the research at any time.

What will happen if my child takes part?

If you agree for your child to take part they will be asked come to with other children to two focus group meetings. The focus groups will consist of 4 – 6 children who will be asked to talk about their experiences and understandings for 30 – 45 minutes. These discussions will take place during school time while the remainder of their classes will continue with their usual lessons / assemblies.

If your child takes part, what will she / he have to do?

If your son / daughter takes part they will be asked to take part in small group discussions about what it means to them to be a girl / boy, man / woman. The discussions will focus on the classroom, playground and family relationships. Initially the discussions will take place in single-sex groups, with follow-up groups of mixed girls and boys.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?

The main benefit for them taking part is that in the production of the school's programme of Sex and Relationship Education teachers will be able to take into consideration the way your child views the world, their understanding of everyday situations and friend / family relationships.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part?

There are no foreseeable risks in your child's participation in the research project.

I do however have to work within the confines of current legislation over such matters as privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights and so offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law. For example in circumstances whereby I am made aware of future criminal activity, abuse either to yourself or another (i.e. child or sexual abuse) or suicidal tendencies I must pass this information to the relevant authorities.

Should your child become distressed in any way by participation in the study there are a number of places you can go for support. Rachel Dyer (The School's Family Liaison Officer) will be happy to speak to you and your child should you be concerned. If you prefer to go outside of the school you may wish to contact for support:

Childline: 0800 1111 NSPCC: 0800 800 5000

How will information about my child be used?

Discussions will be audio recorded, with additional notes being taken during discussion sessions as a back-up. The data will then be used to help the school produce a programme of study in Sex and Relationship Education for Years 1 and 2 children.

Who will have access to information about my child?

At no time will your child be identified by name, either within the school or within the final research material. The researcher (Tracey Wire) will be the only person to retain such information and in line with the Data Protection act will securely store any electronic information on a password protected computer and memory stick, while any paperwork related to the interviews will remain in a locked filing cabinet. This data will be retained for at least five years and will eventually be securely disposed of.

Who is funding and organising the research?

This research has the support of the school's Headteacher and Governors, and of Keele University. This is a self-funded PhD research project.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak to the researcher(s) who will do their best to answer your questions you should contact Tracey Wire on t.wire@ippm.keele.ac.uk. Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact the researcher(s) you may contact Nicola Leighton, Research Governance Officer on 01782 733306 or n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:

Nicola Leighton
Research Governance Officer

Research & Enterprise Services
Dorothy Hodgkin Building
Keele University
ST5 5BG
E-mail: n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk
Tel: 01782 733306

How do I agree for my child to take part?

Please complete the consent form below and return it directly to me (Tracey Wire), your child's class teacher or the school office.

Contact for further information

Tracey Wire at t.wire@ippm.keele.ac.uk.

Appendix 9: Consent form for parents of child participants

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children’s Gendered Identities

Name of Investigator: Tracey Wire

Please tick box

- 1

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

☐
- 2

I understand that my child’s participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.

☐
- 3

I agree for my child take part in this study.

☐
- 4

I understand that data collected about my child during this study will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication.

☐
- 5

I agree to the focus group being audio recorded.

☐
- 6

I agree to be contacted about possible participation in future research projects.

☐
- 7

I confirm that I am the child’s legal guardian.

☐

<div>Name of participant’s parent / carer</div>	<div>Date</div>	<div>Signature</div>
<div>Researcher</div>	<div>Date</div>	<div>Signature</div>

CONSENT FORM
(for use of quotations)

Title of Project: Sex and Relationship Education and Primary School Children's Gendered Identities

Name of Investigator: Tracey Wire

		Please tick
box		
1	I agree for any quotations to be used	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	I don't want any quotations to be used	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	I want to see any proposed quotations before making a decision	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of participant's parent /
carer

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix 10: Children’s Information Sheet and Consent Form

Dear

At the moment we are thinking about the ways to make your Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHCE) lessons even better for you and would like your help to make this happen.

I am going to talk to small groups of Year 1 and 2 children about what it’s like to be a boy or a girl and what they think it’s like to be a man or a woman. I will also be talking to children about their families.

Your parents have given permission for you to be one of the children who take part, but you don’t have to if you don’t want to. Also, if you decide you do want to take part but then change your mind about it, then that’s all right too.

If you decide you’d like to talk to me about these things, then we will get together in a small group. The first time it will be just boys / girls, and the second time it will be both boys and girls. I will ask you some questions and you will be able to talk with your friends about what you think. I will record what you say so that I don’t forget.

When I write and talk about what we have spoken about in our group I won’t mention anyone’s names. This is called keeping information confidential.

Eventually the things you tell me will help us write some new PSHCE lessons for you and will hopefully help me finish some research (finding out information) that I have been doing about Key Stage 1 children and the things they are taught.

If you would be happy to help me with this then fill in the slip below.

Thank you,

Miss Wire

Name _____

Signed _____

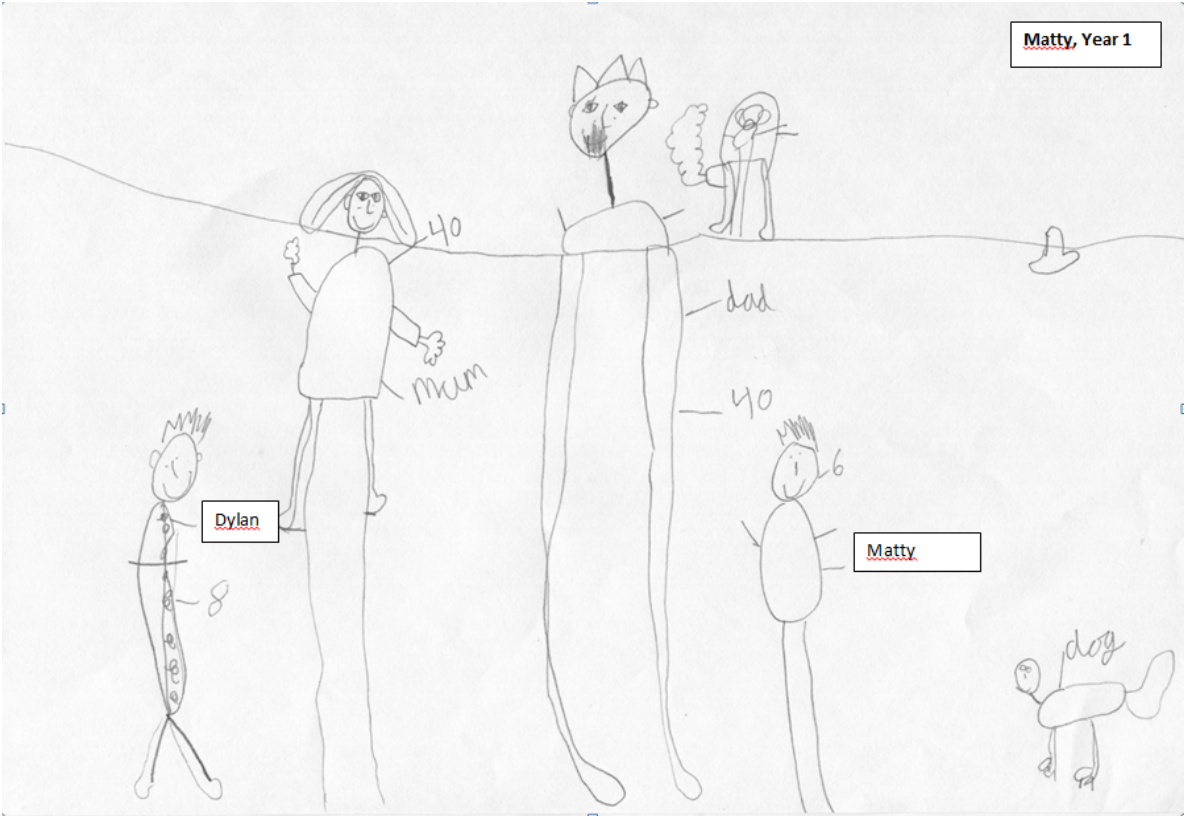
Date _____

Appendix 11: Focus group activities and composition

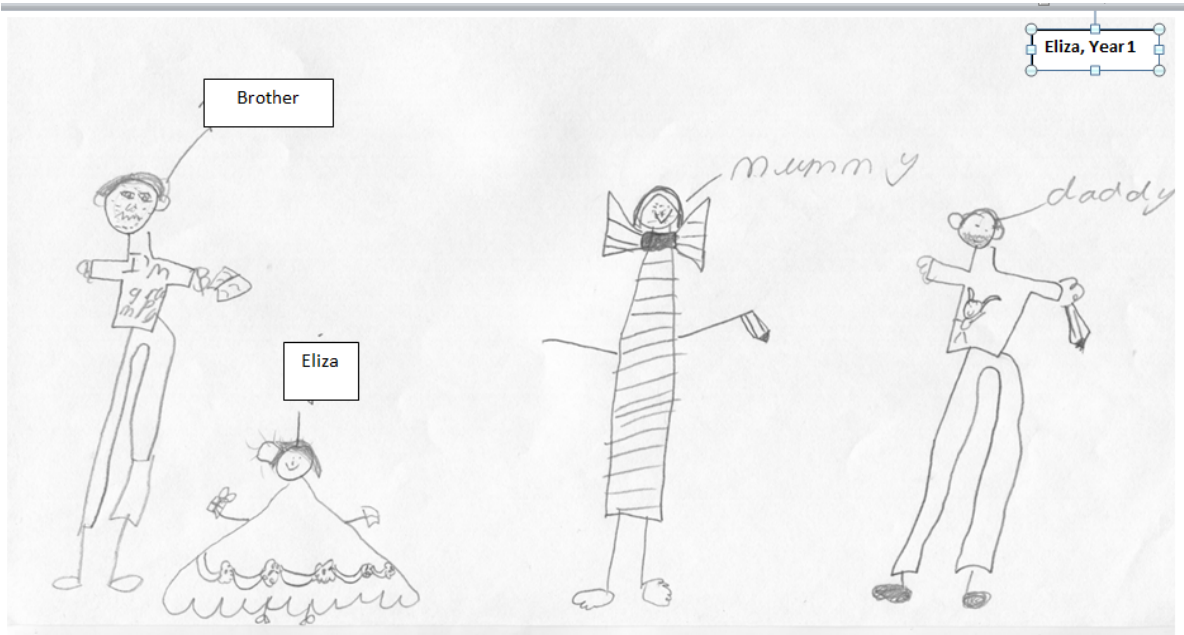
Teachers: Round 1 Mind maps, topic prompt cards and discussion		
Focus Group 1 Sarah Moore, Kate Macintyre, John Drake, Nigel Hall, Jenna Blake	Focus Group 2 Robert Marshall, Lauren Young, Josephine Olde, Rose Garrow	Focus Group 3 Mark Mayall, Judith Harvey, Judith Brown, Lizzy Peake, Hazel Thomson, Thea Redfearne
Teachers: Round 2 Review of Christopher Winter Schemes of Work, viewed <i>All About Us: Living and Growing</i> DVD and discussion		
Focus Group 1 Robert Marshall, Nigel Hall, Lauren Young, Judith Brown, Kate Macintyre	Focus Group 2 Mark Mayall, Hazel Thomson, John Drake, Jenna Blake	Focus Group 3 Lizzy Peake, Judith Harvey, Rose Garrow
Parents: Round 1 Topic prompt cards and discussion		
Focus Group 1 Bella Fellowes, Michelle Thomas, Alicia Knight	Focus Group 2 Oliver Egan, Robert Heymann, Stephanie Ling, Hugh Ling, Eleanor Kennedy, Christie Waites, Bev Gage	Focus Group 3 Siobhan Franklin, Jean Paxton, Maggie Friend, Dawn Winston
Parents: Round 2 Review of Christopher Winter Schemes of Work, viewed <i>All About Us: Living and Growing</i> DVD and discussion		
Focus Group 1 Maggie Friend, Bella Fellowes, Christie Waites	Focus Group 2 Stephanie Ling, Hugh Ling, Robert Heymann, Oliver Egan	Focus Group 3 Siobhan Franklin, Jean Paxton, Dawn Winston, Michelle Thomas
Children: Round 1 Family drawings and discussion		
Focus Group 1 (Year 1) Eliza, Matty, William, John	Focus Group 2 (Year 2) Rosetta, Elizabeth, Charlotte, Emily, Rhianna, Sophie	Focus Group 3 (Year 2) Alan, Mick, Jeremy, Bobby, Nick, Fred
Children: Round 2 Discussion		
Focus Group 1 (Year 1) Christopher, Eliza, Matty, William, John	Focus Group 2 (Year 2) Mick, Rhianna, Bobby, Jeremy, Sophie	Focus Group 3 (Year 2) Rosetta, Elizabeth, Fred, Nick

Appendices 12a-12o: Children's Drawings

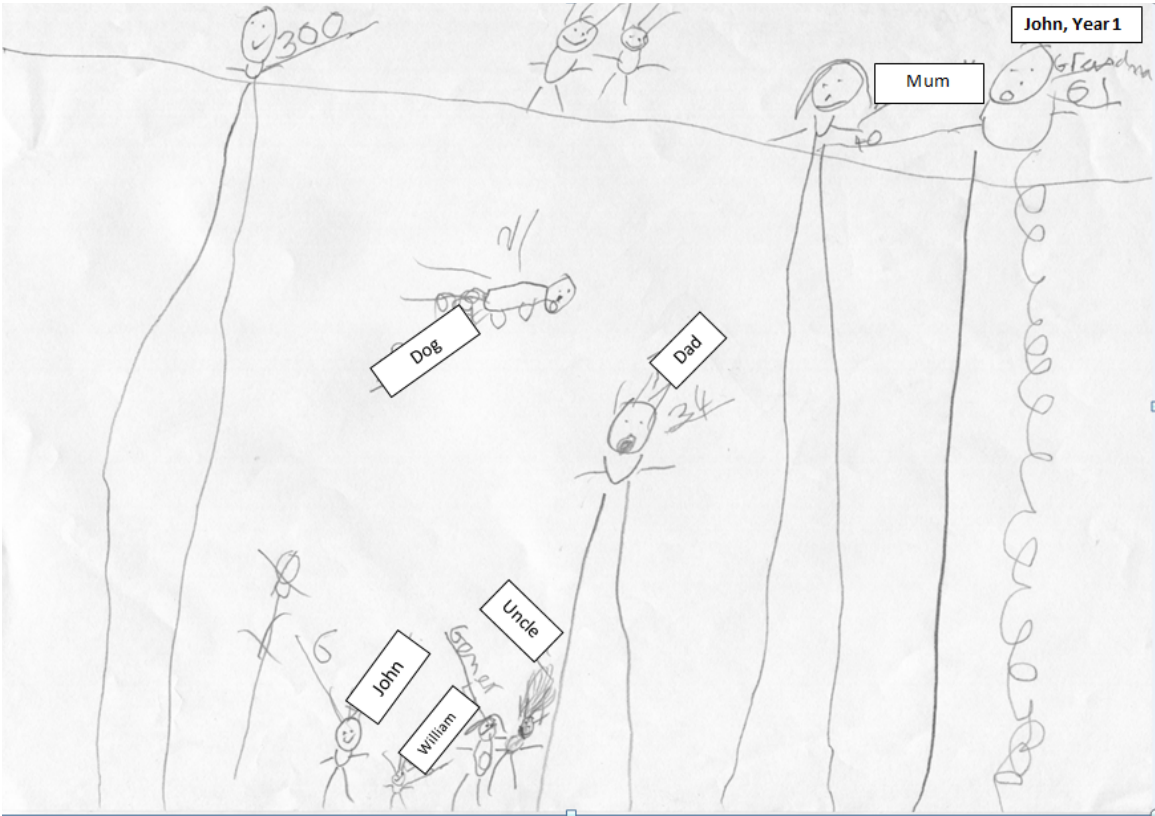
Appendix 12a



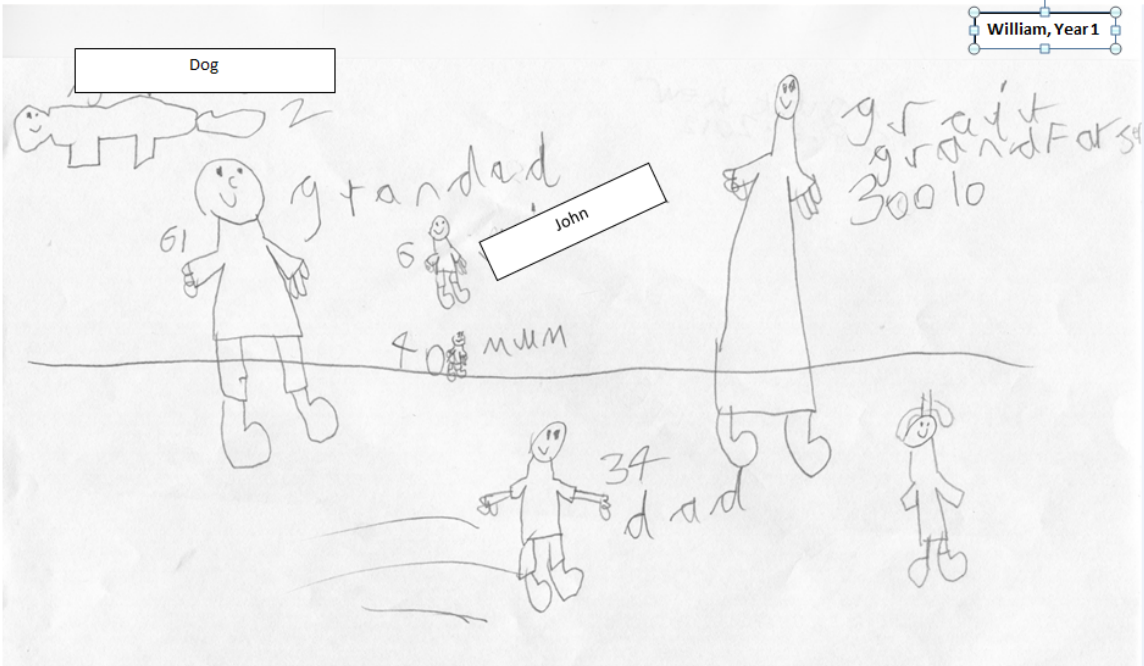
Appendix 12b



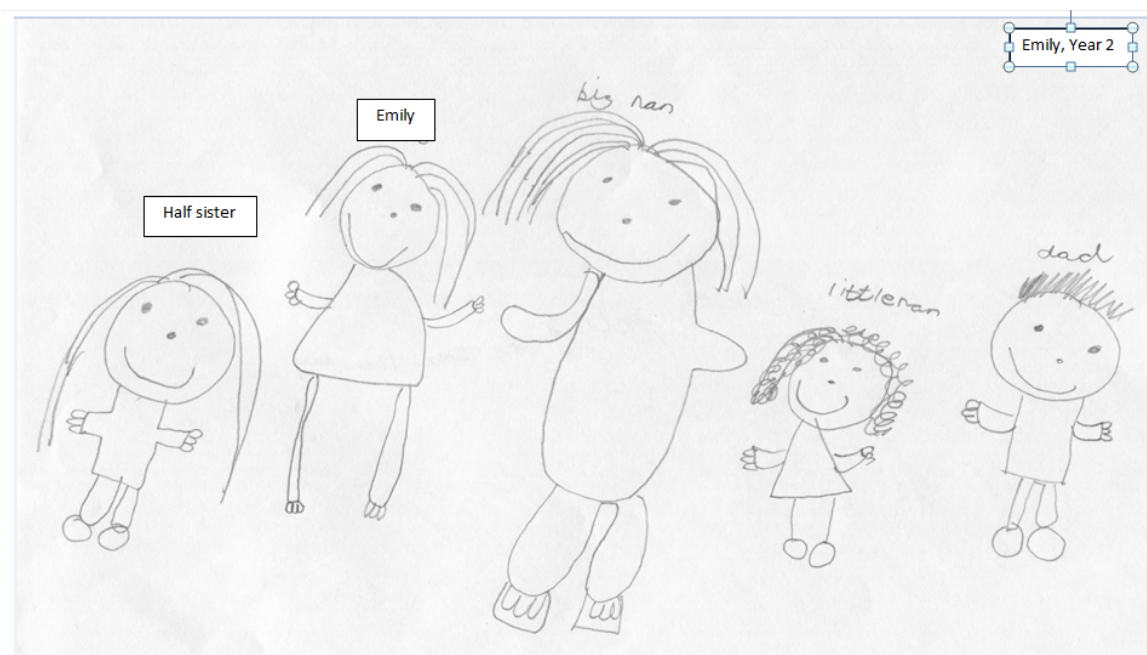
Appendix 12c



Appendix 12d



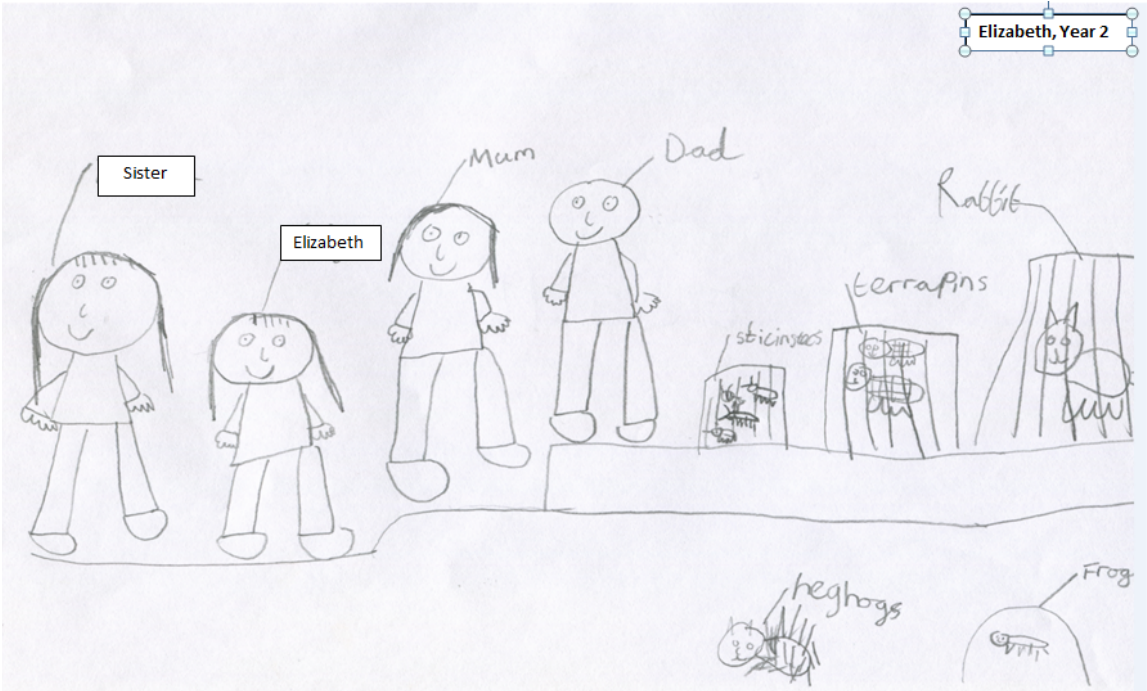
Appendix 12e



Appendix 12f



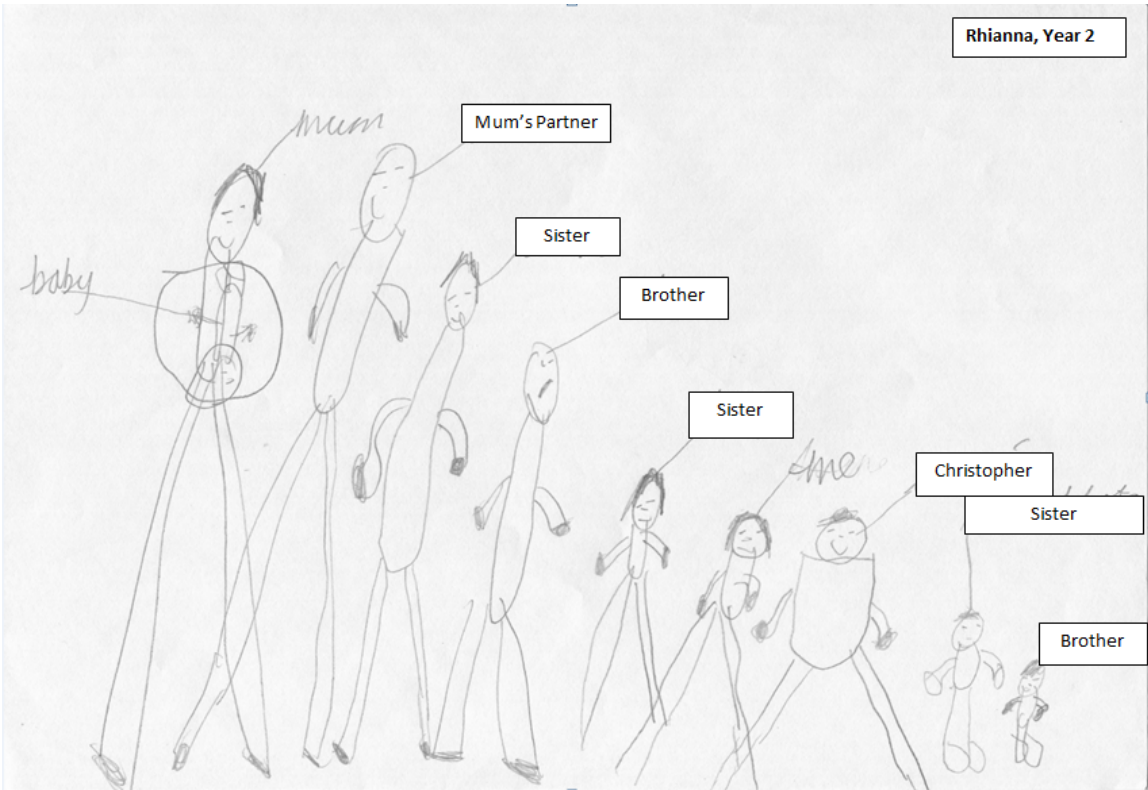
Appendix 12g



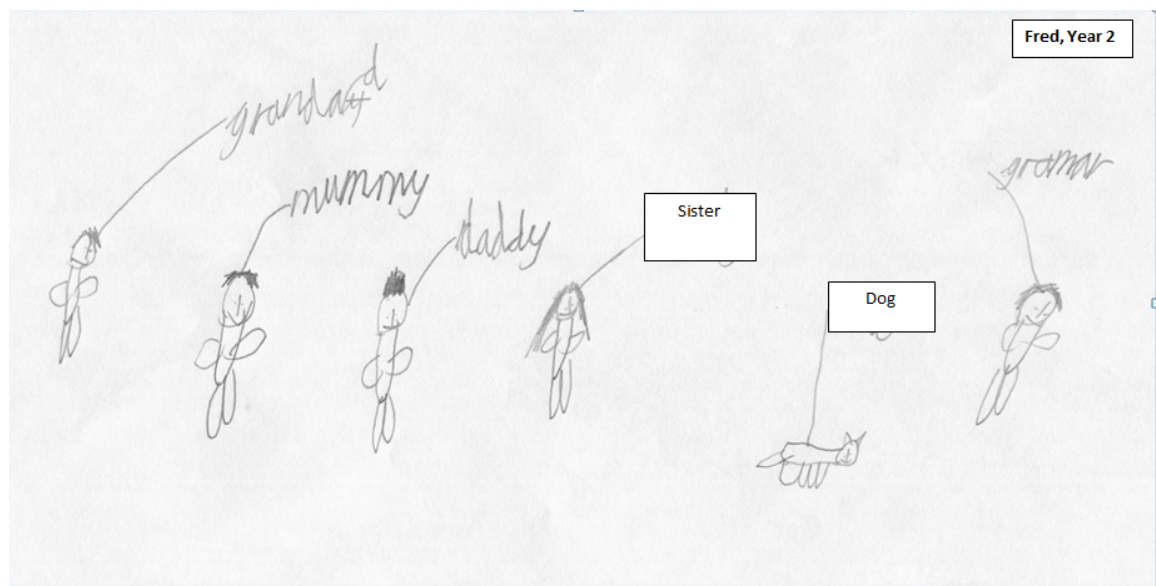
Appendix 12h



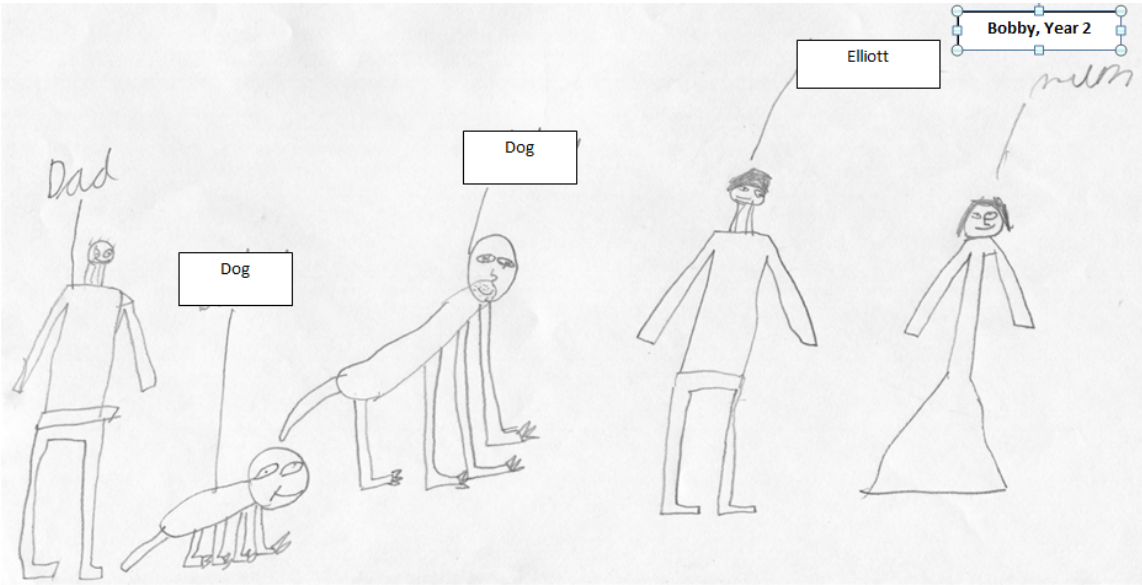
Appendix 12i



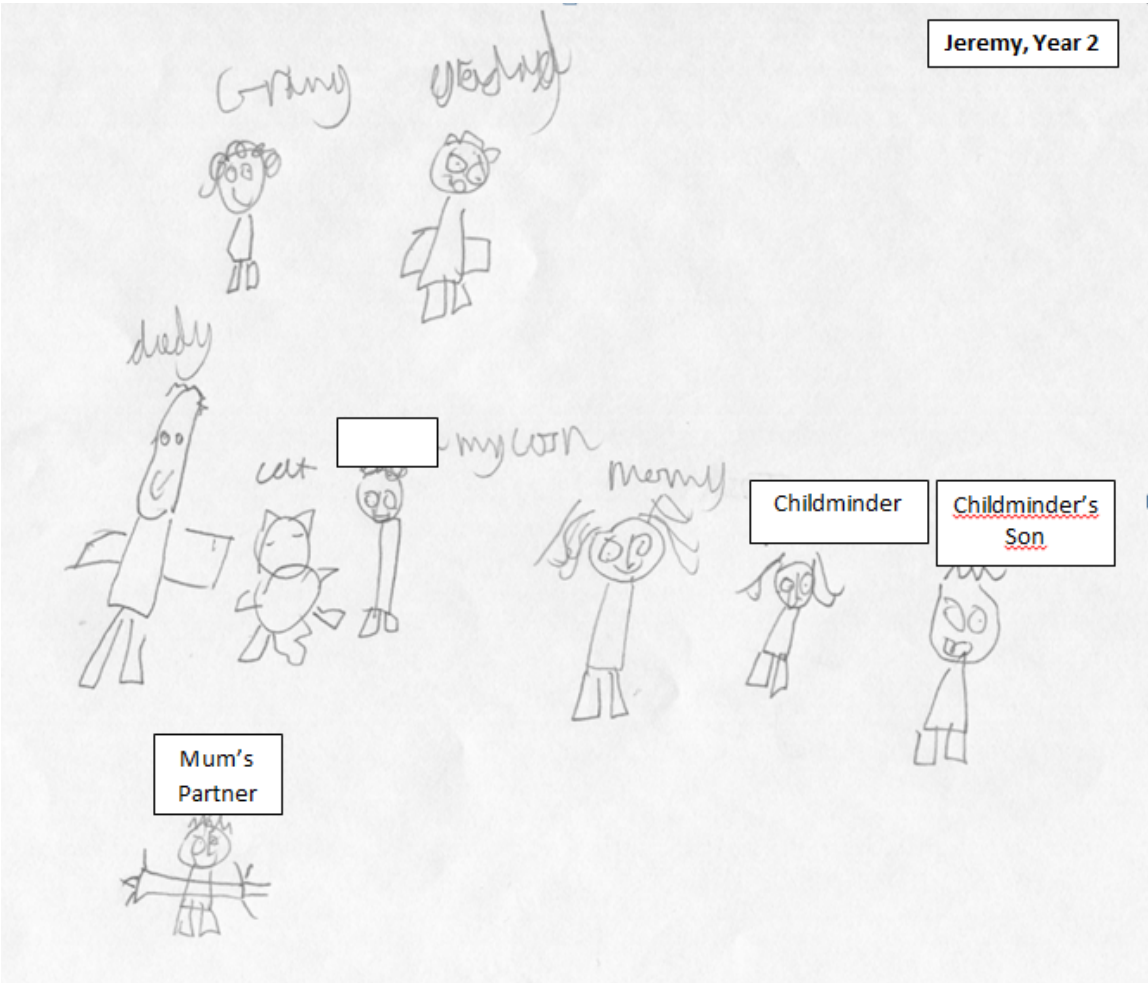
Appendix 12j



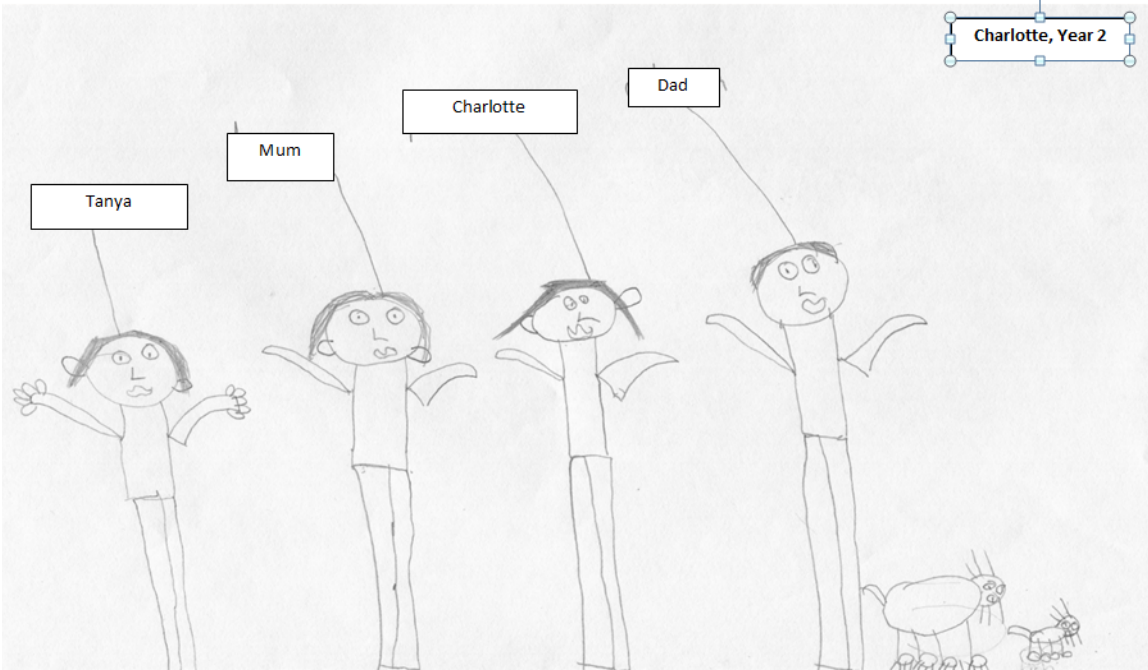
Appendix 12k



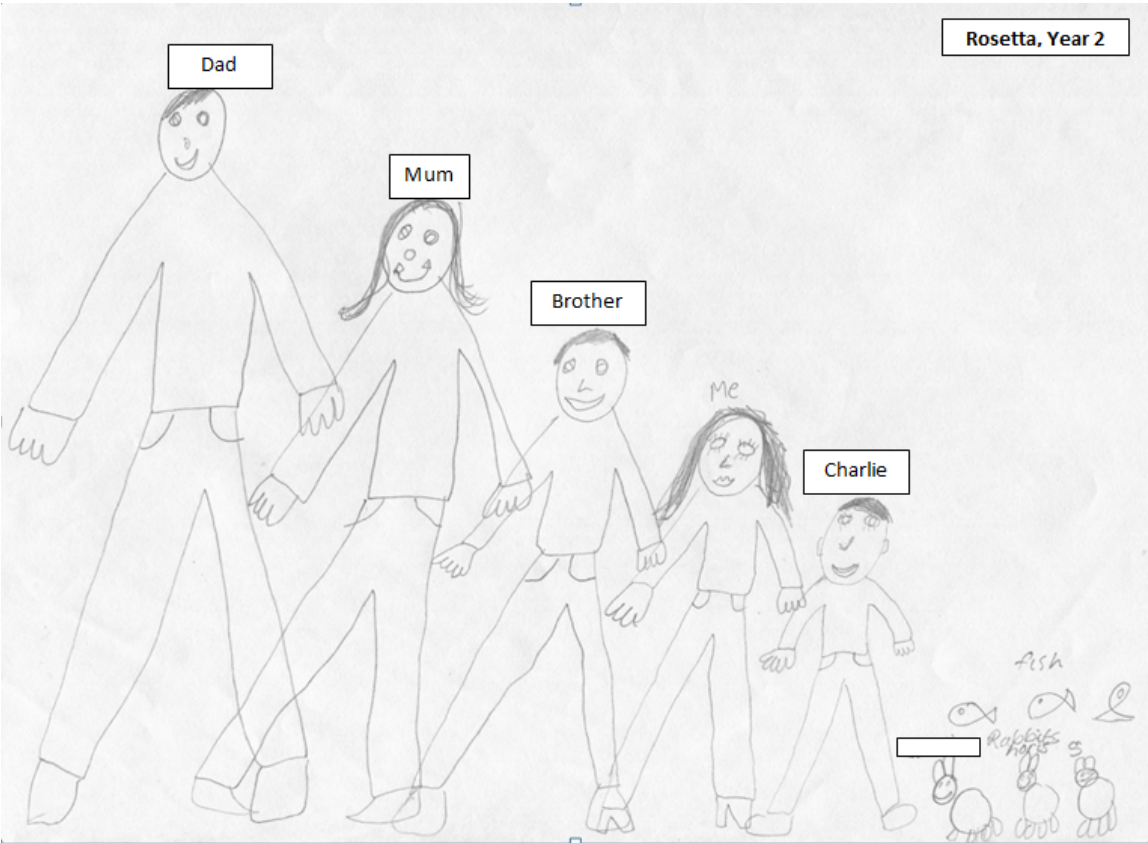
Appendix 12I



Appendix 12m



Appendix 12n



Appendix 12o

